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The Terrible Truth; OR, The Thornhurst Mystery.

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AUTHOR OF "STRANGELY WED," "THE FALSE WIDOW,"
"THE MADDEST MARRIAGE EVER WAS,"
"DOUBLY DIVORCED," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER I. DARE'S ADVENTURE.

DARE'S ADVENTURE.
OWEN DARE came out of the reverie into which he had fallen inadvertently, to find his position suddenly resolved into one promising adventure if not danger.

The little sail-boat was dancing over the short waves of the bay, and a white fog had dropped down with all the suddenness which belongs to the fogs of the New England coast. To add to his discomfiture it very soon became apparent that he had lost his bearings. The little craft required all his attention, as the choppy waves boiled up in foamy wreaths, and he peered out anxiously for some mark to guide

his course. On either side nothing but the dense white fog and the line of foam where his boat cut the water. The nautical skill of which he had been rather proud was of little avail to him in a situation like this. There was nothing for it but to trust blindly to chance, and keep a sharp look-out until the fog should lift.

the fog should lift. There is something exciting in the novelty of a position like this, and Dare experienced more than a tithe of the exhilaration; but notwithstanding the moments dragged interminably, until it seemed to him that hours must have passed, and yet no sign of the fog lessening.

Dare's temper did not improve, as he knew by this time night must be closing in, and he strained his eyes vainly for a sight of the lights along the low line of coast. The prospect of spending the night under short sail, bumping over the bars and reefs, and among sandy islands of the bay, to say nothing of the more than equal chances of being wrecked or capsized, or something else equally pleasant, loomed up a dark and anxious background to the first half-enjoyment and half-annoyance he had experienced.

"One of my usual confounded streaks of luck," growled Dare, with his hand upon the tiller. "Curse the foolhardiness that brought me out on a trip like

this, anyway, I say. Why couldn't I be content to stay with the crowd instead of rushing off to the experiment of cheap yachting on my own hook? Jolly enough with fair weather and nights ashore. I'll allow, but I never bargained for this turn to the programme."

An elasticity in Dare's spirit rose again in a thrill of fierce excitement as the little boat really did bump against a rock protruding from one of those low-lying reefs along the shore. The fog had wet him as thoroughly as a slow, drizzling, penetrating rain could have done, but in the real presence of danger Owen Dare was not the man to give up without an effort, or to be overcome by the small miseries which would have been tortures generally to his somewhat fastidious habit.

Beating about, feeling his way through the opaque gloom, chilled to the bone by that cold mist, with his heart coming into his throat at every alternate minute, the time wore slowly on. A miserable, anxious, and yet exciting portion of the night, destined to linger in his memory and come vividly back to him long years after, was that which Owen Dare spent beating along the low coast of Cape Cod.

spent beating along the low coast of Cape Cod. A puff of wind broke the heavy stillness at last. Another, and soon a fresh, steady breeze was blow-



"WHY, NORA, CHILD, WHAT IS IT?"—HE STOPPED SHORT AS SHE TURNED HER CHANGED FACE UPON HIM.

ing; the fog rolled itself up and disappeared as swiftly as it had come. The moon shone out brightly, for a moment lighting the broad expanse of water and the low, dark line of shore. But, scurrying clouds, drove across the sky, and the moonlight was obscured by a blackness which covered bay and shore and little boat and solitary voyager in the same blank.

But, after all, the blackness served Mr. Dare a better turn than the brightest of the fitful gleams succeeding could have done. A lurid glare shot up from the low shore, a signal fire he knew it to be. Turning his boat he ran for it, with the breeze in his favor, and the waves running high, showing long lines of surf in those brief intervals of light ahead. It was running the gantlet in a race for life as he knew, but he made the distance safely, the little boat, light of draught, passing over dangers which would have stranded larger vessels. It rode the surf, ran safely into the narrow inlet where the light guided him, and, half full of water, it grounded against the strip of beach where a figure stood just without the firelight which was reflected luridly from the water.

He gave the form, half-drawn as it was into the shadow, little enough attention until the shells in the sand crushed under his boot-soles, and it moved forward a step or two waiting his advance. A girl's form, lithe and slight, with straight hair streaming down her back, with round arms bare to the shoulders, and short skirts, which, to Dare's relief, exposed shapely, well-shod feet.

Dare was fastidious to the last degree, and but for this fact one episode out of the life of the girl standing before him might have been spared her. But while Dare's fine sensibilities would have been shocked at shoeless feet, custom had reconciled him to any degree of nakedness *à la décolleté*, and those brown, bare arms and rounded throat might have compared favorably with the fairer ones he was used to seeing.

"I have you to thank for the beacon which guided me in," said he. "But for that I might have beaten off and on all night."

"Or been driven on the bar. It's a wonder you weren't, anyway. There isn't a boat left or I should have rowed out into the bay when the fog lifted."

The voice was clear, a trifle high-pitched, but not unmusical, and again Dare was relieved that it was not a coarse, nasal utterance which greeted him.

"Was the beacon really meant for me, then? I thought it a happy accident."

"I saw the boat out there late this afternoon. There's bad places along here, and we always put a light out on dark or stormy nights, 'specially when the men are at the fisheries and apt to be coming in. That's why there's no boats here now. You'd better come with me, back to the house; that's it yonder. Hannah'll be fretting after me, I dare say."

An unmoving black shadow in the direction she pointed was all he could distinguish of the house, looming more definitely up as they approached it, and with some threads of light making themselves apparent through chinks and crevices.

"Would you not be afraid to go out upon the bay, at night and alone?" he asked, with a shadow of interest in the briskly-moving little creature who was in no way abashed by this night meeting with a stranger, and, what struck Dare more forcibly still, apparently in no way impressed by the marked difference which must have existed between his own elegant self—presented under disadvantageous circumstances though he were—and such types of masculinity, brawny, weather-beaten fishermen, and jolly jack-tars, as she was probably in the habit of associating with.

"Afraid? Oh, la, no!" and her shrill laugh woke the echoes. "Why should I be afraid? You see, I'm used to the water, sir, and I like it—take to it kind of natural like. But, here we are, and here's Hannah'll make you comfortable. Now what do you say, Hannah? Here's a gentleman who would have been beating the coast all night but for my fire. It wasn't mere nonsense, after all."

They had turned an angle of the house where a bright flood of light streamed out at an uncurtained window, and his guide threw back the door and ushered him directly into a wide, low room, where a pleasant-faced, elderly woman was sitting.

"I knew you wouldn't think of going to bed until I was in for keeps, Hannah, so I had him come right along."

Dare, with a glance at the interior, scrupulously clean and neat, and a mental conclusion that "it wasn't so bad as it might have been," made an attempt at apology for his intrusion, but was cut short by his talkative guide.

"Oh, la! that's nothing. We're used to having folks come unawares, aren't we, Hannah? We always have a place for any one that strays out of the right course into our harbor here."

"You're very welcome, sir," said the elderly woman, pleasantly. "I was getting a'most uneasy about Nora, here, but if you'll take a chair, I'll have you a bite of supper ready in no time, and there's always a spare corner for one or a dozen. My own man's away at the fishery, but there isn't a woman long shore who wouldn't do as she'd hev her done by."

Dare accepted the chair and the hearty hospitality, and watched the flitting little figure grown silent as she busied herself spreading a snow-white cloth on a small table, placing the blue-and-white delf, the knife and fork and spoon all silver bright, though of the commonest material, and bringing, at the last, carefully, a presentation cup and saucer of china with gaudy figures of impossible birds and beasts and men, very evidently a piece of sacred property in the humble home.

Though small, it was a well-rounded and well-poised form he watched, and a face that, even to his prejudiced eye, looked out of place amid such

surroundings. Clear and finely-cut features, a complexion which, while it might have been improved by less reckless exposure to wind and weather, was firm and smooth, a scarlet mouth just a trifle wide, but a square cut, which made it a most pleasing feature, and the floating hair of that bright, warm shade of which poets sing—unmistakably red. The brown hands were plump and small, and there was that native grace about the girl which is born in some persons, never cultivated.

She turned to the corner where the woman Hannah had started a blaze, over which the kettle was singing cheerily.

"You'll not want me any more to-night, mammy. I'm off, then."

She took up a candle-end, lighting it, and with a glance toward the guest, showing him apparently self-absorbed, withdrew.

Those last words had given Dare another chill. Though perhaps no great respecter of persons himself, and without any very stable principle at bottom, he was a stickler for all proper observances. A child addressing a parent by the proper name formed a wide departure from the strict letter of his code. It was an inviting little lunch of which he partook a few moments later, and Hannah, otherwise Mrs. Cheswick, as she gave her name at his solicitation, installed in her wooden rocker, was by no means averse to taking her part in the conversation which the gentleman proved himself affable in sustaining.

"A cheerful contrast to what I might have been enduring but for your daughter's forethought, Mrs. Cheswick. She appears fond of her home here, fond of the water, she said."

"Yes. Nora's venturesome, a'most too much so, I think, sometimes. But, she's not my daughter, sir, though I couldn't think more of her. I never had one of my own. Nora's not one of our kind, though she's been with us a'most all her life, and we've sort of adopted her—Jabez and me."

Dare politely looked his interest, and after a second's hesitation Hannah went on.

"I served in her mother's family once, and though my young mistress married a seafaring man about the time Jabez and me started for ourselves, she didn't forget me for the three or four years after, when we never once saw each other. She used to send little gifts now and then, and now and then a letter, though not bein' handy with my pen I could never send back more than my duty. But, at last, she came herself, so changed it gave me a sore heart for long to think of her. She was going on a long voyage for her health, and the doctor said her only chance was to leave her child. She had most confidence in me, and came to see if I'd take the little thing, and settin' a price three times what the trouble'd hev been worth even to a stranger. I was only too glad, hevin' neither chick nor child of my own. Nora was two then, a puny, delicate little thing, but began to grow and thrive from the first she came here. My poor young mistress died on the v'yage out, and it's nigh about ten years now, since a word has come from Nora's father. He's dead like enough, long ago, without ever comin' back from furrin parts. We think a sight of Nora, Jabez and me, and do the best we can for her, though it ain't what she ought to hev by rights. If you'll please to walk this way, sir, I'll show you your bed."

Some odd contrasting visions blended in Dare's mind after his head lay upon the pillows, and before he lost himself in dreamless sleep. Visions from which two faces looked out upon him, one of the girl he had seen for the first that night; the other fair, high-bred, arrogant, but both were lost soon enough to the tired adventurer of the evening.

In her cot-bed in the little loft Nora was wakeful and thoughtful beyond her ordinary custom; she had been a thoughtful, boisterous, healthful and sound-sleeping child up to this date, but slumber came to her also after the murmur of voices died away below, dream-broken, perhaps, but sweet and calm.

CHAPTER II.

DARE'S FRIEND.

Next day was cloudy, with a strong wind and a rough sea. Mr. Owen Dare was quite well enough reconciled with his humble quarters ashore to content himself for forty-eight hours more in the hope of securing a more auspicious cruise than this prospect would have insured him. And, somehow, when that day had passed and another morning dawned clear and bright, with a favorable breeze and a smooth surface blue as the cloudless sky above, Dare's desire to take his leave had unaccountably departed.

"You see, I'm not accountable to anybody for my actions just now," he condescended to explain, sitting with his hostess, and watching Nora's lithe figure through the open door, where she was devoting herself to some stunted, late-blooming roses which only constant care had coaxed into existence at all there in that sterile, sandy soil. "I've a fancy to stay here for a week if you're willing to keep me, Mrs. Cheswick."

"If you're pleased to be satisfied with your lodgin', sir. It a'n't equal to the hotel at Brewster, nor to the places where they make a p'int of takin' summer boarders, but such as it be you're welcome to as long as you choose. Jabez'll say the same when he comes, which I rather look for him to-day or the morrow at furthest. It's not often we have gentlemen amongst us, and Jabez takes to 'em kindly, which isn't always the case with our rough 'long-shoremen, ef I must say it; and besides, you can tell Nora of her own sort better'n I who was never good at minding their ways. I'd like her to know more of such ladies as her mother was. Nora has her looks in part, and she takes to learnin' jest as I used to see her do. She went to school down to Brewster two terms, did Nora, and got all they

could learn her there, but she's always pickin' up books, though Lord knows where she manages to find 'em."

Dare sauntered out where Nora stood with the shadow of a smile upon his lips. He had glanced over a heterogeneous collection of well-thumbed volumes in the little room which had been allotted to him. The Pilgrim's Progress, a tattered volume of Clarke's Commentaries, the Swiss Family Robinson, one or two novels of the Claude Duval style, one or two of the Oliver Optic series, Midshipman Easy, The Lady of the Lake and Lalla Rookh in gorgeous bindings of red and gilt, quite outshining the tattered dinginess of the rest.

"Never read, I'll be bound," he had thought, remarking them, but glancing through discovered his mistake by the frequency of light pencilings upon the margin, the leaves worn thin and glossy in places as if by much turning. "The little thing has something in her, after all, if this is her doing," he mused, lingering over favorite pages of his own. "It's really refreshing to find a bit of natural sentiment in a place where one might least expect it, here on the sandy waste of Cape Cod. Almost worth a week for the sake of cultivating, I fancy."

The week stretched itself into a fortnight, and still Dare lingered there. Jabez had come, a true specimen of the rough-spoken, genial 'longshorner, as unsuspicious of any harm which might come through the gentlemanly stranger's sojourn there as was his simple-minded wife.

And, meantime, Dare was loitering along the shore, or taking short trips out upon the bay, always with the same companion—Nora. He read to her from the few books he had brought along with his equipments, and repeated whole pages from others, lying on his back in the sand, looking up into her face—that ingenuous face with the frank, brown eyes which would light with enthusiasm, or scintillate with mischief, or look back into his with tantalizing unconcern, which piqued Dare into more real earnestness in his flirtation with the little Cape Cod rustic than he had often put into the hundred-and-one flirtations he had probably compressed in his experience heretofore. But to Nora, innocent, light-hearted child, these two weeks had gone by like a revelation—a revelation scarcely understood, a delicious, lingering, dangerous time, which could never leave her quite the same she had been before—a time that awoke in her longings to know more of the world from which he came, to be more like those fine birds with fine feathers he vividly described to her.

"Don't you know that I like you far better as you are?" he said, laughingly. "There isn't one of them all who mightn't be improved by being more natural, and you are all natural, you dear little creature. You can't imagine how disgusted I have been before now with their artificiality, superciliousness and pretensions. If I could I would never change you by one of their airs which are not graces in my eyes. Never you wish for the high places again, Nora, for—

"True hearts are more than coronets,
And simple faith than Norman blood."

Quite true in fact, before *Lady Vere de Vere* was ever written, and quite as true in these later days, and here where the respect for blood and coronets, a little disguised, perhaps, is quite as strong as in the mother country."

And Nora, simple heart, believed his every word. How could she help it, poor child! with his bold eyes looking their undisguised admiration upon her. How could she know that Dare was speculating idly, at that very moment, upon the vast improvement a little culture and refining influences of association might bring to the wild, untrammeled girl who exercised an odd sort of fascination over him? It was only the novelty of the affair entrancing him, and he never spared a thought to how much more desperately earnest a matter it might be to Nora. If he had it would have made little enough difference. Owen Dare was never given to considering the comfort of others before his own whims.

The time came soon enough, when Nora's dream ended.

She was all alone in the house up in her little attic chamber. It was not later than ten of the forenoon. Jabez had gone out early with his lines, and Dare, declining an invitation to accompany him, had taken his own flexible rod and drifted out near the mouth of the inlet for an hour or two of quiet sport. Hannah was a mile away at a neighboring fisherman's cottage, and Nora, with a snowy drift of linen that thrifty housewife had left her to hem, heaped ignominiously in the center of the room, a book which Dare had been reading to her the previous day open before her, but claiming her attention no more than the work just then. She sat on a dingy old rug upon the floor, one arm thrown up and her head resting against it upon the window-sill, winding a lock of her bright hair around her finger, a tender expression about her mouth, and almost a serious light in the usually saucy and defiant brown eyes. She had never admired that ruddy hair of hers—had been rather ashamed of it in fact—but since Dare's coming she had looked at it critically more than once—soft, silky, straight and lustrous—wonderful hair had she only known it, and after every survey better reconciled to its uncompromising hue. Dare had called it beautiful, and already Nora's eyes saw through reflected light.

She became conscious, presently, that another sound was mingling with the beating of the surf upon the shore, growing nearer and clearer, and she started up, looking out with eager, questioning eyes. Yes, there it was without a doubt. A glittering equipage, drawn by high-stepping bays in silver mounted harness, and a colored driver upon the box. Such magnificence quite dazzled Nora's unaccustomed eyes. She held her breath and look-

ed again as the coachman, with a flourish and a sweep, drew up the carriage before the house not a dozen rods away. A man sprung down and hurried forward to meet Dare advancing over the sands. From her little upper window she watched the meeting.

"Dare, my dear fellow! I wonder you're not ashamed of yourself after all the anxiety you've managed to set astir. You're taking it deuced cool, too, so far as I have an opportunity of judging at first sight. What sort of account of yourself do you expect to give a certain fair divinity when you meet? Seriously, though, I'm agreeably disappointed at finding you in such first-class trim, not at all like the wrecked and lonely mariner on the desert shore style I was expecting to find."

"Vivian! What in the name of wonder brought you here? None the less glad to see you, my dear boy, but I'd as soon have expected to run across you at the north pole. Come along in out of this sun and we'll have mutual explanations at leisure."

"First, how long is it going to take you to gather up your traps? I'm engaged to bring you back with me some time during the morning. You have some excessively anxious friends waiting your appearance at the hotel in Brewster, I assure you."

"Much obliged for their sudden interest then. As to traps, I'm not cumbered with that sort of material here. I could be ready in five minutes, and I'll drive back with you in the course of an hour, that is, supposing you have changes enough to supply me with a suitable outfit for the time. Truth to tell, I was beginning to weary a trifle at the monotony here."

"I should think so," dryly, with a glance at the bare coast and the low, dark dwelling. Then, pausing to speak to the coachman, directing him to drive slowly up the shore and return in an hour, the two strolled side by side into the cottage. Nora drew back from sight as they turned that way, but with all the doors and windows standing wide, every word floated up to her, clearly distinct.

"Now, how did you come to find me out?" Dare asked, drawing chairs for them both in the cool, low room. "Got a weed about you? I haven't enjoyed the luxury of one for two days."

"And you appear to have stood it like an anchorite. Here, a prime one, I assure you. A rumor was brought into Barnstable by a party of fishermen of a solitary voyager wrecked somewhere in this direction, having sustained more or less damages by the way, and reported to be lying in a more or less critical condition in some such snugger as this. I chanced to stumble across a member of your original party, whose information regarding your latest whim seemed to point you out as the luckless individual in question."

"And, as usual, Rumor had the best, or the worst of it in this case. My little adventure was by no means so desperate." He recounted it briefly, omitting, however, any personal allusion to the little maiden, whose watchfulness had proved such an efficient aid to his rescue. "Here I have been ever since, in lazy enjoyment of the *dolce far niente*, my only reason for lingering, the sheer lack of energy to take myself away."

"Oh, blow that, Dare! As if anything ever drew you out of your way without a feminine mixed in the case. You may as well confess first as last. Who is the 'she' in this case, bound to suffer for your lordship's amusement?"

"On my word, you give me too great honor, Vivian." Dare's cool, drawing voice had an insincere sound to the ear of the listener above. "You're entirely mistaken for once, at any rate."

"Oh, well, all I've got to say is that you ought to be labeled 'dangerous' before you're let loose in unknown lands. But now, have you nothing whatever to ask me? Have you no curiosity to learn who is so anxiously awaiting you in Brewster?"

"Really, begging your pardon, so far as I see, any one with a probable interest in me could have no possible business in Brewster. Go ahead; I'm quite willing to listen."

"What would the fair Miss Ferguson say to that, I wonder? You might have some tremors in regard to making peace there. The lovely Augusta very properly concludes that she has something to forgive on this last score."

"You don't mean—" Dare paused, but as the other made no show of helping him out, concluded—"that she is here?"

"Nowhere else, my dear fellow. Consider such devotion! You treated her confoundedly shabby, too. After promising to meet her party at Newport a good three weeks ago, you break that contract to take up with a roistering bachelor party, leaving the coolest possible note of explanation behind, and it appears break there again, to end in landing yourself where I find you. That was your whim. Miss Ferguson's was to change her plans to embrace a visit to this unfashionable coast, terminus to be Barnstable and vicinity, but tidings of your disaster unfolded the pinions of aggrieved love, overruling every other consideration. I fell in with them at Newport, and of course was only too happy to be included."

"Kind of Miss Ferguson, and considering the case, it is hardly fair to keep that lady waiting longer than necessary for our advent."

Nora, who had heard with a vague understanding, moved softly from her place, and went down the rough stair which led from the loft, and into a little corner porch, where Dare found her when he came to seek a moment later.

"Ah, there you are, Nora, *cherie*," he began, in that familiar way of his. "I'm going rather suddenly, and if you'll be kind enough to give this to Hannah, and tell her for me it doesn't half pay the obligation I'm under—Why, Nora, child, what is it?"

He stopped short as she turned her changed face upon him.

"Oh, I know you're going away, Mr. Dare! You seemed very glad of the chance not many minutes ago, and it was only your lack of energy has detained you here so long. I've heard every word you've been saying in the last half-hour. I was up there—with a jerk of her head toward the loft—"as you might have known if you'd only taken the trouble to think. I don't know as I have any call to be a go-between. See Hannah for yourself; it's on your way direct enough. You'll astonish her with your mighty grandeur, too!"

Her flushed, indignant face had an unpleasantly set look upon it. Dare was going and was glad to go; it was only his "lack of energy" had kept him here, and she—credulous heart!—had believed it something more. He had given ample cause for the belief, to her simple faith. He understood the case and devoted himself to pouring oil on the troubled waters.

"Aren't you sorry I'm going away, then, Nora? I hoped you might be. You didn't suppose I was leaving in this abrupt fashion forever, did you? I'll be back sometime within a week—there's the boat to be attended to, you know—and I'll bring the new magazines back with me. Now, will you tell Hannah just how it is, or I'll see her myself, if you still prefer."

"That will be better," Nora said, coolly, her questioning eyes upon his face. Dropping them and turning away, she asked, abruptly: "Who is Miss Ferguson?"

"Miss Ferguson?"

She flashed about in time to catch the amused quiver upon his lips.

"Quite an old friend of mine; you mustn't let that trouble our friendship, though."

He held out his hand, and Nora gave him hers, a trifle reluctantly; then Dare went within again, softly whistling. Nora walked away, feeling that it was an imperfect peace between them, and turning an angle, found herself face to face with Dare's friend. He lifted his hat, as she looked up into a face younger than Dare's—a dark, handsome, beardless face, with dusky hair curling carelessly about the brow.

"I am taking the liberty to admire your flowers while waiting for my friend Dare, in there. They are yours—yes, I was sure of it."

"They do poorly in the soil here," she answered, feeling it incumbent upon her to say something.

"Every blossom is all the more valuable for that. I know a lady who would give a round price for those opening rosebuds, to wear to the hop to-morrow night. I wouldn't answer for your keeping them if she had a sight."

"Is her name Miss Ferguson?" Nora asked quickly.

"Yes, her name is Miss Ferguson," with a sharp glance at her; but with an inclination of her head she moved away.

"I've discovered the secret you kept so close," he said, as Dare joined him, a moment later. "Never tell me there's not a feminine in the case, after that leonine-crowned little heroine."

"A little termagant," laughed Dare, glancing after the retreating form, crossing the sands in a direction to avoid the glittering carriage with its prancing steeds.

And Nora, with her teeth set hard, was thinking.

"I'll see this Miss Ferguson, I will, and I'll find out what she is to him."

CHAPTER III.

MISS FERGUSON.

A GREAT white building, with staring green blinds and long porches on either side, was the hotel where the Ferguson party were stopping. There was an uncomfortable glare about it, an atmosphere of stifling heat reflected from its spotless walls. It was the middle of the hot summer afternoon. A little breeze came in from the bay, but not sufficient to dissipate the sultriness of the day.

Nora glanced up at the front of the tall building curiously, and at the few forms lingering about the porches, in no way awed or abashed by either. She went up the steps and in at the wide entrance, and then paused, irresolute and hesitating, not knowing which way to turn. Several gentlemen were passing back and forth; once a waiter hurried by within a yard of her, and she took a step forward just too late to accost him; but no one gave a glance at the small figure in a dress of light print, sprigged with blue, broad hat, tied down with a blue ribbon, and little covered basket swinging from her arm. She would certainly speak to the next person who passed, she thought, and as a springy step came down the stair, put herself directly in the comer's way.

"Why, bless me!" said a surprised voice. "Dare's little friend, is it not? Do you want to see him?"

It was Dare's visitor of the previous day, and Nora's hesitancy disappeared at sight of a face not entirely strange.

"I want to see Miss Ferguson, Mr. Vivian. I don't know who to ask, or where to go to find her. I've brought those flowers you said she might like to have, you know."

Nora half faltered under the amused glance of those dark, keen eyes, which seemed to see clearly through the transparency of her errand. She felt that she could have hated him had he smiled then, but the firm, handsome mouth was grave as a deacon's.

"Oh, Miss Ferguson—yes!" He glanced about speculatively, and beckoned a form that was leaning over an upper banister, looking down. "That is Miss Ferguson's maid. Here. Victoria. Show

this young lady up, and mind that she sees your mistress."

He turned away with a nod, and if there really was a smile on his lips now, Nora was none the wiser.

The maid looked the trim little figure sharply over with a decidedly sour expression.

"This way," she said, shortly, and led her up a flight and through a long, narrow passage, pausing with her hand upon a door-knob. "Miss Ferguson's engaged now, and it would be as much as my head's worth to interrupt her. Can't you make the other one—the cousin—do? She'll see you right away, I haven't a doubt."

"It is Miss Ferguson I wish to see."

"Oh, well then, you'll have to wait, I suppose, since Mr. Vivian said it. In there, and I'll tell her presently."

Nora entered and the door closed after her noiselessly. She found herself standing in a dimly-lighted chamber, where every object was presented shadowy and indistinct. Soon her eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom, and she sat down on the nearest chair, studying the articles about her. It was the first time in her life she had been transported into the charmed atmosphere of a lady's dressing room, as the scattered paraphernalia declared this to be. There were combs and brushes and cut-glass bottles of perfumery upon one table, crumpled flowers and ribbons and gloves and laces upon another; robes of silk and muslin spread over the chairs, and tiny rosetted slippers upon a stool. It took her some minutes to make all these things out. Another door standing ajar swayed under a waft of breeze and swung a trifle wider, letting in a slit of bright light upon the carpet. It let in more—the sound of voices from the adjoining room. Something low and tender in a voice she knew, which brought Nora to her feet, with her breath stilled upon her lips as she leaned forward to look through the narrow aperture.

It was an interesting tableau presented to her sight. Dare on a sofa by the side of a lady, young and beautiful to Nora's glance, but a haughty, repellent beauty, even to her inexperienced eye. A pale, faded, undecided beauty, Dare could have told her, beside her own glowing, youthful style. But Nora, seeing the delicate complexion, the thin, aristocratic features, the blonde hair elaborately dressed on the top of the haughty head, the long, slender white hand which Dare took in caressing fingers, felt, with a heart sinking like lead, what a difference must exist between this high-bred lady and the little rustic whose recollection could not carry her beyond the barren sands of Cape Cod. His manner would have told her of it had not her own quick intuition done so. He was tenderly deferential here, pathetic and pleading, where he had been assured, confident, daintily masterful with her. The lady's face was coldly averted, though her hand lay quiescent beneath his touch.

"If you really cared for my good opinion, Mr. Dare," the lady was saying, "you might have betrayed greater respect for the arrangements, which were mutual, I believe. The plans of the entire party were marred by the failure on your part."

"I almost despair explaining my motives satisfactorily. On my honor, it never occurred to me that such an insignificant individual as myself would ever be missed, or that a week or so could make any particular difference. I yielded to the solicitations of my friend and took a run across to this bare coast. You know what the result was, my adventure, which scarcely deserves the name of adventure, and the circumstances detaining me there."

"Finding very tolerable amusement making love to a fisherman's daughter, Vane Vivian said. I must really applaud your taste, whatever I may think of your discretion and common sense, Mr. Dare."

Very cuttingly sarcastic was the lady's tone, as the slender hand half-withdrew itself from his clasp.

Only half-withdrew, and then lay passive, as he, understanding the nature of women, loosed the touch of his own fingers. The truth, which no one knew better than Dare himself, was, that Miss Ferguson was as anxious to bridge over the misunderstanding as he could be, provided that her own unquestionable dignity was in no way compromised.

"What injustice you do me, Augusta!" His voice was plaintive in its reproach. "I should never think of doubting you on such small provocation. You should know that I am never forgetful of the devotion which binds me to one object only—yourself. You should trust me rather than Vivian's chaff."

It was the very same tender tone Nora had heard addressed to herself numberless times before this. The same ardent, admiring look he had bestowed on her. She locked her fingers in a tight strain as she watched and listened. Under the influence of look and tone Miss Ferguson was gradually softening.

"The fisherman's daughter was really handsome in a way, I believe Vane said," she remarked carelessly, a flush creeping into her cheeks under his gaze. Well-bred indifference was not proof against the vulgar vice of curiosity, intermixed, perhaps, with a little jealousy.

"You misunderstood him, then: Vivian's opinion reflected quite the other way. A wild little creature; you would find no beauty, I assure you, in her freckles and red hair and oddities, though I admit she would make a picturesque figure *a la Watteau*."

That was all she had ever been to him, then! A creature of freckles, red hair and oddities, with the possibility of making a picturesque figure—and those tender words and looks of his were no more for her than all the world besides; all these were for the fair, cold lady melting graciously before them, the one object of his devotion. What a simple

little fool she must have seemed to him! and Nora's eyes flashed and her cheeks tingled with mortified, angry pride.

Even simple little fools suffer for their folly, and Nora's heart quivered and shrunk under this sore stroke. It was a moment before she heard anything more, then Dare was saying:

"I will see you to-night, of course. Have you your tablets handy? I shall claim the first dance, the redowa and the lancers and the quadrille of course—"

"That will not do at all, Owen. You are marking every alternate dance; positively not more than three, or we shall be remarked."

"Why shouldn't we be?" protested Dare, recklessly. "For my part, I am very willing to be remarked in such excellent company." The reconciliation was growing perfect, very much to the satisfaction of the gentleman.

Nora drew back into the gloom of the next room and played her side-piece to the scene very much after the fashion of a high tragedy romance, gritting her little teeth and thinking spitefully:

"He'll see her to-night, and he'll dance with her—oh, yes!—and perhaps even think of the little creature of 'freckles and red hair and oddities' as compared with her. But, she sha'n't have the chance of looking fair with *my* flowers—I'd eat them first." At which the outraged heroine of the present romance emptied the fragrant contents of her little basket upon the floor and trampled on them in ineffable disdain, but doing all so quietly that the two in the room beyond never suspected her presence there.

Miss Ferguson was both perplexed and annoyed at finding the ruin there, two hours later.

"Who could have done it?" she asked. "Just what I wanted for my dress to-night. You were surely not so careless, Victorine!"

Victorine, congratulating herself upon the unusual amiability of her mistress, which probably spared her ears a boxing on the mere suspicion, made haste to answer:

"There was a young person here when you were engaged with Mr. Dare, who said she'd wait instead of seeing Mrs. Ferguson as I wanted her. I suppose she'd tired of it when I looked in here and found her gone afterward."

The odd conduct of the mysterious young person struck Miss Ferguson as something rather remarkable, and she mentioned it during one of the intervals of the dance that night to Dare. An uncomfortable idea occurred to him, the true one, but he was discreet enough to offer no suggestion.

At that very hour, three miles away, Nora was looking out of the little square window of her attic into the starlit night, watching the lines of foam roll up and break upon the shore, her face set and still and hard as only some painful experience will leave so young a face.

Dare kept his word and came back within the week, making a bargain with Jabez to return the boat he had hired forty miles away to its proper owner, and asking presently for Nora. Nora was not to be found, however. He left the books he had brought and went away, more disappointed than he was willing to confess to himself.

"A civil-spoken gentleman if I ever see one, Nora," said Hannah, that night. "He's goin' away with his friends to-morrow, and it's not like we'll ever hev him here again."

CHAPTER IV.

A LETTER AND A CHARGE.

THE glory of a mid-August day lay upon the earth. Fields of late golden grain all ready for the harvest waved in the sun. Others turned their brown stubble toward the sky, and invited flocks of chattering, noisy birds by their wealth of scattered grains.

Nowhere was the splendor of that fervid summer month reflected more joyously than from the long reaches of Thornhurst. Never had the rich old estate given back a better yield; never had the orchards been more amply stocked with ruddy-cheeked golden-striped fruit; never had the vineyard upon the hillside hung fuller of purpling, luscious clusters; never had the strips of woodland flung out such green, fresh banners at this season when the heat and the dust, the wear and tear, are so apt to reflect in tarnished blotches upon nature's gala-dress. Thornhurst mansion had put on a different aspect under the waving foliage, the masses of clambering vines, the wide, smooth lawn, the masses of shrubbery and flower-garden stretching at its sides. A substantial red brick structure with many angles, with long, narrow windows overtopped by scrolls in white stone, with high, roomy chambers within, where all the brightness of sunshine, of glowing tints and rare adornments had been gathered to make perfect this well-based home.

Thornhurst mansion had gone up in all its stateliness not a quarter of a century before, when its master, Colonel Seymour Vivian, brought his bride with him to the old estate lying in one of the fertile valleys of Western Pennsylvania. He was forty-five and she was barely eighteen. His was a soldierly figure, tall, straight, broad-shouldered and deep-chested, while she was a fairy little creature, one of those fragile, clinging, affectionate women, helpless as the tenderest of flowers, meant to be always well-sheltered and well-cared for, never fit to cope with the ills and woes of the world's struggles.

For all this seeming disparity no happier pair of lovers ever made of wedded life a lingering honeymoon. A brief honey-moon at the best. All peace and joy will sometimes prolong a life, but in this case they were powerless to save one. For two brief years Alice Vivian was mistress of Thornhurst mansion and queen of her husband's heart; then she died, leaving another tiny life to grow into the void left behind.

That was twenty-one years before, and Vane

Vivian now was just of age, the idol of his father, for all there were sometimes tempestuous scenes between them.

Seymour Vivian, hot-headed and passionate all his life long, had grown irascible with advancing years. He had a great, generous heart within the straight, towering frame that withstood time like some grand old oak grown rugged under the storms—a generous heart, but crusted in by obstinacy and long-indulged self-opinion, until now he stood with his faults and his foibles, a hot-tempered, hasty old man, whose passions were like tropic storms, fierce and short-lived.

Something had gone amiss with him this bright August day.

Thunder was on his brow, lightning in his eyes, and an ominous stillness in his aspect, the calm before the storm. A quick, springy step approached, and Vane Vivian entered his father's presence, his smooth, dark, boyish face, handsome and glowing as it had been not many weeks since on the sandy stretches of Cape Cod. He tossed the dark hair back from his forehead, dropped into a chair, and began a tattoo with his fingers upon a table beside him.

"You sent for me, I believe, father?"

"I sent for you, Vane." The words coming from that enforced stillness of manner were like a distant, warning growl, but Vane appeared delightfully unconscious of all cause for fear in the presence of the old lion. Colonel Vivian came to his feet, and carried his admirably-developed gait twice the length of the room with the heavy military tread which was a part of himself, decidedly emphasized. He had brought his title out of the Mexican war, where he had served with marked bravery and distinction, but his soldierly bearing emanated from the strict discipline of West Point, long years before. He turned, stopped, and the storm burst in its fullest fury.

"Yes, I sent for you, you dog! By the Lord, but it may be close upon the last time that I shall send for you, disobedient young scamp as you take pains to prove yourself. Do you see this, sirrah, and this, and this? Do you know what they are? Duns coming from all points, debts of your contracting after the very handsome allowance I made you with the strict proviso that you were not to go into debt. Look at them! Gambling debts, betting losses, liquor bills, a score that would disgrace the most dissipated rogue and gamester in existence. By the high heavens, you do well to carry it all with a free hand, but we'll see if there's no check to such lavish indulgence."

Vane sat with his head resting back upon the chair, his dark, glowing face in bold relief against the crimson upholstery, looking coolly indifferent as if he had the very least concern in all these charges.

"Well?" he said, inquiringly, as the other paused.

"Well! What have you to say for yourself, sir?"

"I? There seems no necessity to say any thing. The bills speak for themselves, it appears. You'll see them paid, of course."

"I'll see you hanged"—his hand came down upon the table with a mighty crash, and a round oath completed the sentence. Colonel Vivian was very often both unreasoning and abusive in his wrath.

"Is that all you have to say, father? I promised to join Dare on an angling expedition this afternoon. High time I was off."

Colonel Vivian's righteous indignation was too intense for expression. He stamped across the floor once more, with a great effort swallowed his violence, turning a sternly angry face upon his son.

"That is not all—not the worst if what I have heard be correct. Didn't I warn you against that villain Montrose? And I find you dangling after that girl of his in defiance of my express prohibition, and my revelations meant to open your eyes to the tactics of the precious pair. You were there yesterday, not two hours after I had been speaking upon that very subject."

"Your information is eminently correct, sir. Really, you succeeded in arousing my curiosity regarding such a dangerous piece of feminine duplicity, and I had never particularly observed the young lady in question. Finding myself near their place I called in for the express purpose of taking observations, and I found Miss Montrose as fair a piece of dainty flesh and rich coloring as I'd care to see. It was rather a novel and enticing idea, that of having such a superior person fling herself at my devoted head, but I saw enough to convince me that you may set your mind at rest on that score. However much I might be inclined to aspire there, it is very evident Miss Montrose has no thought of stooping to conquer. Deucedly telling on a rather good-looking young fellow's vanity, but the truth nevertheless."

The purple, angry flush died slowly out of the colonel's face. The first gust was generally the worst one with him.

"It's their devilish subtlety in making things appear so, Vane. I know Walter Montrose, and I know that he would move heaven and earth to get you in his clutches, to see his gipsy daughter installed here as mistress of Thornton. Gipsy or quadroon, she might be either from her look. I tell you, Vane, all the rest would be a small offense at the side of your disobeying me there."

"Upon my word, father, it strikes me you are a trifle more earnest than the case demands. If it were reversed now, and Thornhurst depended on my taking to Miss Montrose, you might be pardoned some tremors regarding the issue. If I ever find myself in imminent danger from that quarter, I promise to give you fair warning at the risk of disinheritance after the most approved high-tragedy method. Just now it might be more to the purpose to give your lawyer instructions regarding the liabilities represented there. Luck took an odd turn, but it all comes into a man's lifetime, I daresay."

Vane rose lazily and sauntered away as the colonel gave no sign of continuing the conversation.

"As well look for oranges on crab-trees as expect old heads on young shoulders, I suppose," muttered Colonel Vivian, knitting his bushy brows together.

"Every young man must sow his wild oats, and the devil fly away with the harvest!"

A light of pride flashed into his eyes as he saw Vane, a few moments later, cross the lawn and join his friend at the furthest extremity. Despite his variable, passionate moods, it was a fond father's heart beating in his bosom—a heart in which the handsome, dashing, reckless young fellow, was enshrined in a very wayward sort of blind idolatry. An idolatry which could overlook the grave faults brought to light and represented in those bills lying before him, but would have been relentless in crushing itself and him at any intimation of the danger he almost feared, the danger of the misalliance of his son with the daughter of Walter Montrose. After all it was not so much the contemplation of such a misalliance as the possibility of certain lately formed plans of his own coming to naught.

He drew a letter from his pocket which he had perused more than once since its receipt, upon the previous day. A letter written in a scrawling, illegible hand on thin blue rustling paper, which he spread wide and read once more.

"Rio Janeiro, June 20th, 1867.

"COLONEL SEYMOUR VIVIAN:

"My dear old friend of younger and happier days, in this my hour of need I turn to you as the one person in the world to whom I can proffer my request, to whom I can trust a sacred charge.

"I am dying, Seymour, dying alone, with no more kindly face to watch me now, with no more kindly hands to close my eyes at last, than of the faithful native who has followed me in all my wanderings, these past ten years. Ah, well, let me not be ungrateful! There are few hearts so true as that of my good Kalig.

"You were kind enough once, when I was so happy as to render you some slight service, to urge upon me that if I ever should stand in need of friendly aid, be the return however great, that I should apply first of all to you. The time has come, Seymour, when that long-past promise is sweetest solace to dying man.

"Perhaps you know that I married almost a score of years ago. My wife was always delicate, failing constantly after our child was born, a little daughter, called for the mother—Lenore. At last, when the little one was scarcely two years old, my wife taking counsel from her physician's solemn assurances, and yielding to my own entreaties, consented to a separation from our child and accompanied me upon a voyage in the hope of being restored to health. It was the last hope and a vain one. Lenore died on the voyage out, and I never since have set foot within the limits of the States.

"I have wandered all over the world since that, cutting off all near and dear ties as the time went, and it is years now, since I have even heard from little Lenore. My heart reproaches me for my neglect. Is it asking too much of you, my friend, to look after the welfare of my daughter? Will you be to her as the father she has never known?—kinder, nobler, more generous than I have ever been.

"I have little enough to leave her. My sole earthly possessions are my personal effects which shall go to Kalig, the poor pittance of a few hundred dollars I have managed to put by, some shares in diamond mines here in Brazil that have turned out all expense and no income, and a pension which dies with me. It is asking much, but I believe not more than you will cheerfully perform.

"Little Lenore was left nearly fourteen years ago with a couple named Cheswick, a fisherman and his wife, on the coast of Cape Cod, three miles north of Brewster. I am writing this at weary intervals as I sit propped up in my bed. Tell my little girl for me that she is latest in her father's thoughts. Heaven bless her and you, dearest and truest of friends, will be the last prayer of

EDWIN CARTERET."

Colonel Vivian folded and replaced the letter again, and sat lost in a sorrowful abstraction.

"Poor Ned," he thought, regretfully. "Always a dreamer, always roving and unsettled, and much of the woman in his gentle nature, though always brave and firm enough where his friends were concerned, however it may have been with himself. A sad end for him—poor Ned!"

Then Colonel Vivian's thoughts turned to little Lenore, who was poor Ned's dying charge, and he sat drawing fair lines of possibilities through the dim future.

We never grow too old for castle-building and Colonel Seymour Vivian set up a fair structure that day, not counting upon the chance of its tumbling in hopeless ruin about his ears some day—the too common ending of our *Chateaux d'Espagne*.

CHAPTER V.

VENETIA.

OWEN DARE had come to Thornhurst at the solicitation of his friend. He was a distant relative of these Vivians, so very distant that it would have been a difficult matter to have traced what degree of kindred blood flowed in his veins and theirs.

He leaned over a side gate opening from the lawn gazing away across the long reaches of waving fields and nodding woodlands, all to come down some day to this forty-second cousin, who had been graciously pleased of late to make a favorite of him. He appreciated the value of the favor quite sufficiently to cultivate it, for in the five years since his majority was passed the very small patrimony which came to him had melted by such imperceptible degrees that he himself could not have told how and when the last of it took wing. A very model young man to all outward seeming was Owen Dare. He was not dissipated, he never gambled, he was choice of his language and of his actions as though morality itself were at

the base of all he did. One exception perhaps might have been found in those numerous flirtations of his where more than one woman's peace had been destroyed, but Dare acted in accordance with the sarcastic saying parodied from Judge Taney's famous decision—"Women have no rights men are bound to respect." For all his fair character and rigid observances, Dare was cold-blooded and unprincipled at heart, who, presenting an appearance to which no one could take exception, was the worst of possible mentors to a hot-headed, reckless youth like Vane Vivian.

He swung the gate back as the latter joined him, and closed it after they had passed through.

"I began to think the finny innocents were to go undisturbed to-day," he said, relieving Vane of a part of the tackle he had brought along. "You are late."

"Had a little breeze with the colonel," Vane remarked composedly. "I expected something of the kind, and the gust wasn't by any means so bad as it might have been. I say, Dare, I came near getting into difficulty regarding the incomparable, black-eyed Montrose."

"Ah?" Dare was noncommittal and apparently uninterested there.

"He got wind of my call yesterday. I didn't tell more than half the truth in giving the object of it. I wouldn't be guilty of such a flagrant breach of confidence as to repeat that my curiosity was to see the siren who has thrown such a potent spell of enchantment about the conqueror. 'Pon my word, old fellow, if Miss Ferguson gets an inkling of this affair I wouldn't give much for your remaining chances. They stop here—the Fergusons do—as they pass through sometime about the last of the month. It's undeniable, though one hates to say it about so much propriety, the fair Augusta is jealous as a Turk, and faith! I think I shouldn't like to be her maid when our high lady's temper is up. That affair of the little girl down on the coast nearly cooked your goose for you, and take my word for it this following so soon would certainly be successful in completing that very interesting culinary operation."

"I'm not aware that I should object in the least. Nothing but keen necessity ever drove me to put myself in that noose, as you very well know, not so far that it may be gracefully withdrawn, I'm thankful to recollect. I couldn't see my way clear by any other means when I fell in with Miss Ferguson's rather evident expectations. The colonel's very generous offer has changed the phase of affairs since that. This prospect of doing the continent as traveling companion and useful attendant upon your august self gives me two whole years of grace yet, and who knows but the chance of a fortune with the flavor of old nobility about it which may cost less dearly than Miss Ferguson's meager eighty thousand in hand."

"Cool, by Jove! And meanwhile is the lovely Montrose doomed to languish alone? I wonder what you will do when there are no more worlds left to conquer, Owen!"

"Emulate Alexander, and— Is that the fishing-ground? Trout it is then for the next three hours, let us hope."

The shy, speckled beauties held an adverse league it was made to appear. They very decidedly declined to be lured by charmingly-natural flies, or squirming, disgusting grubs, such as Dare resorted to. Vane, never a very loving or patient disciple of Izaak Walton, strolled off, leaving his friend to grill under the August sun alone. However exemplary Dare's patience may have been with an eye-witness at his elbow, it wore away soon after the other's departure.

He shouldered his rod and sauntered down stream, casting sharp glances on all sides of him as he went. He struck across the Thornhurst outlying fields presently, through a belt of cedars, to a narrow, solid gate set in a high, impenetrable hedge stretching beyond. It yielded to his hand and he stepped within, cautious still and hugging the shadow of the deep hedge. It was a gloomy, overgrown garden in which he had come, and at a distance through the matted masses of shrubbery and vines he could see the gleam of a white dress, the vague outline of an advancing form.

The figure came straight on to the spot where he stood. A figure Juno-like in its proportions, a face of the richest brunette type, olive complexion, pomegranate bloom, and wondrous dark eyes, lighting at sight of him.

He put out his hand with one word:

"Venetia!"

"Owen! Oh, you should not have come again. You fill me with such dread and terror lest we should be discovered."

"Dread and terror with me by you, Venetia? Remember it needs but one word of permission from you to put an end to it. I am not afraid to face your stern, cruel father."

"Not cruel, Owen—at least not cruel to me. But he might be, he would be, if he knew how I have disobeyed him. I fear most for you, Owen. He would kill you, I do believe."

"I can very well believe in his perfect willingness to do it, my own dear. But for the deed in fact, gentlemen don't nowadays pink their adversaries under the fifth rib, or set hired ruffians on the track to add another to the list of mysterious disappearances, and make game for the police corps."

"You don't know my father, Owen. You don't know how terrible he is when his anger is aroused." The girl shivered in the warm afternoon air, and cast a frightened glance toward the house half-concealed by the rank, neglected growth between.

"I know myself, Venetia. I know that no man on earth ever yet mastered me or thwarted me in any object; no man on earth ever shall, not even Walter Montrose—your father. Forget him for the time, my love; think only of me. I have told you what I will gladly relinquish for you, the woman I might marry

but could never love. I am going away, within another month, to be absent two long years. Venetia, can you refuse me the happiness I have plead for, for the brief time left us?"

The great, soft dark eyes were fixed steadily upon his face, so tenderly that Dare's own bold tender ones—falsely tender eyes they had been before this—wavered and were averted for the moment, but she did not answer in words.

"Confound the innocence that will take no meaning but the straight one, bounded by a wedding-ring, out of such impassioned love-making as mine has been," he thought. "But, I love the bright siren all the more for it. I've never been thwarted in my life and I don't expect to be now, by a woman. Mine she must be, mine she shall be, by fair means if I can't get her by foul. But who would have expected so much prudery in that glowing type of tropical exuberance?"

Dare, whose cold heart had never throbbed out of time even in the heat of his most vivid flirtations, was desperately in earnest now. So desperately in earnest that he was willing to put all his future at stake for the sake of these coming weeks.

His eyes met hers again, pleading, eager, drawing an answering light from her very soul.

"Can you hesitate to choose between us, Venetia—your father and me? He would sell you like a slave to the highest bidder. He has set his mark high; he aspires to Thornhurst and the hand of its heir. If he fail there he will not lack other opportunities, held in reserve. Which will you be, Venetia—another man's slave, or my loved and loving wife?"

A richer glow swept into the rare dark face as she clasped her soft, thrilling hands upon his arm.

"Can you ask, Owen—can you doubt? Yours, yours before all the world besides. But not now, Owen—" shivering again, but not through any lack of trust in him—"I would not dare to brave my father's anger now while his hopes are so firmly fixed."

He leaned forward and kissed her, and with that kiss put the seal of his possession upon this "rare and radiant" creature who had enthralled him.

"You need not, my own. You need not openly defy him until the time comes when I can openly claim and properly care for you. You know just how meager a lot mine promises to be, and you are willing to brave that for my sake, you who have been from your childhood impressed with the one aim—to marry rich."

"If you could know how I have hated the thought," she interrupted him, passionately. "If you could know how I have loathed myself, how I have felt myself debased by having that one aim kept always before me! You never will know, Owen, but you must, you shall know what glory I take in trampling over the unworthy aim to be your wife. Why, I have gained new respect for myself in knowing you to be so poor a man."

"And you will not deny me now, Venetia? You will be my wife now—at once? Think of these long two years! How can I endure to face all that time and think that the power of man might avail to part us. Marry me in secret, if you prefer it so—now, to-night. There is a train from the station here, at half-past nine! we can take that to the town, ten miles up the line, go to a clergyman there, return at midnight, and no one need be the wiser. Will you—to-night—my own?"

"Owen, so soon! And I cannot. Oh, go, go quick! my father is coming. Oh, do go, Owen!"

She pushed him from her in her fright, but he caught her hands, holding them firmly.

"Will you, Venetia, to-night? Promise or I shall stay here and face him."

"To-morrow night, then; I would be missed to-night. Go now, before he turns this way."

With a close pressure of her hands in his, one kiss upon her lips, he released her and was gone in a second more.

"I would move heaven and earth rather than lose her now," he thought, taking long strides through the fragrant cedarwood. Owen Dare would have moved heaven and earth albeit to his own destruction in accomplishing any aim on which he might set his selfish heart.

His mind was stirred by some other element than unalloyed bliss as he passed over the distance to Thornhurst. He had won, but he had counted on that! He had won the radiant creature who had fired his slow blood in two short weeks as it had never been fired before, and scattered all the cautious selfishness of his entire life to the winds. And, having won, the difficulty of his own position obtruded itself, but with no effect toward changing his intentions. He stood committed, to a certain degree, to Miss Ferguson—not committed beyond recall, but bound in all honor to define his relation toward her by the proposal he had all but made, and Dare was punctilious even in surface honor. He had been as nearly committed perhaps fifty times before, but never under exactly similar circumstances. In this case the result was expected, not by the lady only, but by the entire circle of their mutual friends; he had intended it himself, a little regretfully, up to this memorable visit to Thornhurst. He had been driven to it by keen necessity, as he expressed himself to Vane, and that eighty thousand in hand had presented itself as a last alternative,

Some objective points there had been, and as Dare all his life had catered to his own fastidious habit, he had shrunk back from a final proposal. He had passed over a half-dozen capital opportunities, fairly running away from the last when Vane Vivian cut his sojourn short on the New England coast, asking him along to Thornhurst. And at Thornhurst another chance came to him unexpectedly. He had engaged himself on the spot when Colonel Vivian offered him a situation as traveling companion to his son. It was a sacrifice of course, but Miss Ferguson

was two years older than himself, a trifle *passé*, and with the temper of a shrew, while the eighty thousand would be quite as safe and possibly as desirable after the trans-Atlantic tour.

Then into the complacent stream where he was drifting swept the fierce, strong current of the passion which changed the stony heart of the man to one of living fire. He met Venetia Montrose! What now was the weighty argument of that eighty thousand dollars, what the bonds of restraining honor, what the well-based expectations of Miss Augusta Ferguson and the host of mutual friends? Nothing; better than nothing; something to be swept aside by the force of his resistless will.

Vane lifted himself from a reclining posture under the skirting elms as Dare, still with that absorbed expression upon his face, crossed the lawn.

"Prepare to meet thy doom, oh, thou of brittle faith! Buckle on thy armor and gird thyself for the fight. The war-horse scents the battle from afar—what premonition hast thou, oh, valiant knight?"

The other stopped, annoyed, as though some thought of his own had betrayed itself.

"What gibbering nonsense possesses you now, Vivian? I'm surly as a famished bear, confoundedly hot and uncomfortable at that. In the language of Captain Cuttle, just 'sheer off,' will you, till I induct myself into fresh clothes and get a mouthful of something to refresh the inner man. Trout in August is a humbug, and your example more wise than I gave you credit for."

"Thanks, my Pythias. It would be an ill-return for such generous appreciation of my humble self to leave you an appetite unimpaired with Damocles's sword swaying over your head. That may be mixing similes, but the fact is that the Fergusons come on to-morrow, per telegram one hour and fifteen minutes ago. An addition to the party, a Mr. Sholto Norton Hayes, may be expected along, and a letter from Hilton in the mail dubs him the new string to the fair Augusta's bow. Look out for your laurels, Dare, is all the advice I have to offer.

"August trout may be a humbug," mused Vane, lapsing back to his former attitude, and watching the other pass with half-shut, lazy eyes, "but I'm mistaken if your August recreation, my dear fellow, isn't a more dainty species of angling. It's no concern of mine to interfere, however, in spite of the colonel's nervousness.

CHAPTER VI.

INTO THE DARKNESS.

DARE kept himself close, all of the following day, until the dressing bell clashed its warning through the great house. The Fergusons had come during the morning. The party comprised, as leading spirit, the fair Augusta herself; as matron and chaperone a fair, timid little woman, with unvarying sweetness of disposition and not the slightest force of character, the wife of a cousin who was Augusta's nominal guardian, though she had passed by seven full years the age when a guardian's dare may be legally dispensed with. Besides, there were two young ladies, just blossoming into society—fluttering, insipid young misses enough; a masculine Ferguson, not the cousin but another, one degree removed, marriageable, weak-voiced, with a flax-colored mustache, which engrossed half his time, the thin, fair features that characterized the family, who divided his languid devotion with charming impartiality between the two young *debutantes*. And the new addition since the young men left the coast, Mr. Sholto Norton Hayes.

The Fergusons were connected with the Vivians in about the same remote degree which linked them with Dare, and the change in their plans bringing them to Thornhurst full two weeks earlier than indicated by the original programme was due entirely to the leading spirit. After years of aimless and indifferent drifting, Augusta's aspirations were fixed. She had never married, for the simplest of all reasons—no eligible person had ever asked her to marry. The eighty thousand had drawn her numerous admirers, it is true. It had been no secret in these later years that Miss Ferguson wanted a husband, but Miss Ferguson had set her mark high, after her own peculiar views, and her frigid *hauteur* was unmoving toward the common crowd who flocked about her. Miss Ferguson had money and she wanted a husband, but she wanted a husband of elegant style, a fair share of good looks, and unlimited devotion. She had found her *beau idéal* in Dare. He had been very attentive during this season past, but he had fought shy of the important issue, and if Dare had been desperate Miss Ferguson was no less so in reference to the end. Some rumor of the proposed European sojourn was wafted back to her, and in hot haste she had followed him up, determined that this next week at Thornhurst should decide their fates. Mr. Sholto Norton Hayes had attached himself in the very nick of time to become a weapon in the fair lady's hands. She who had never bent from her iceberg severity, unless indeed to Dare, now stooped to conquer. She smiled mild encouragement upon Mr. Hayes, and took him in her train, and swept said train off to Thornhurst in greater haste than her own rather particular sense of propriety was willing to approve. But it was one of those great issues requiring great measures; for the only time in her life Miss Ferguson forfeited her regard for *les convenances* and proved herself equal to the occasion.

Dare roused himself to make his usual careful toilet, and went down, half an hour later, when a second, loudly-clanging bell cleft the brooding quiet. The quiet changed to a small Babel as the four ladies made their appearance in a body, and the gentlemen following close, the whole party went in to dinner—a flightier, more superficial party it is safe to conjecture than had made merry in the high, wide dining-hall since the last annual visit of the Fergusons to Thornhurst.

Colonel Vivian was a genial host, and there was

no flagging of the general enjoyment as the various courses were discussed.

Long, slanting shadows crept in over the lawn, and the last of the sun-rays glinted back from the windows and burnished the walls of the stately mansion. Miss Ferguson and her young lady friends were grouped picturesquely upon the lawn, the former silent, the latter animatedly discussing the relative merits of the two young gentlemen, Owen Dare and Vane Vivian, as the gentlemen themselves followed so speedily that if a deduction had been drawn involving the comparative attractions of wine and ladies, it must have reflected strongly to the favor of the latter.

Colonel Vivian alone lingered, and Sholto Hayes was detained in the drawing-room by Mrs. Ferguson. The other three passed out through the wide open windows, and by chance rather than design Miss Augusta found herself alone with Dare, with the lawn stretching between them and other companions, strolling side by side at the edge of the fish-pond, which was one of Colonel Vivian's especial cares.

The sun was quite down now and the purple tints of twilight fast succeeding. The distant voices mingled with the faint rustling of leaves borne upon the breeze. Here was solitude, romantic surroundings, and the witching hour which is prone to delude. The fair Augusta's heart beat perceptibly faster, a flat contradiction to an assertion which had once been made that she had no more heart than a salamander. Had she maneuvered for it she could not have brought about a more auspicious combination of circumstances. The question was would Dare take advantage of the opportunity? She led the conversation with artful references to his own expected absence and her probable plans.

"Yes," he said, indolently suppressing a yawn, "two years *do* look rather long ahead. The voyage will be a bore, and doing the continent something tedious, I haven't a doubt. But to a mortal who has no aspirations for the future it's about one whether the months drag through here in the States, or in China, or Hindostan, to say nothing of the intervening localities. For my part I don't know that I'd give a picayune for the difference."

Miss Ferguson was startled—shocked out of her cultivated serenity. This was rank heresy coming from Dare whose looks if not his speech had declared before now the absolute misery of existing out of her presence. Every man must have some aspiration. Certainly he, brilliant and talented—with a confiding glance—had *some* hope which he was cherishing?

Dare remained sublimely unconscious of the soft imputation. Was he blind, willfully blind? Did he never intend to speak at all? A sullen glow of anger and injured pride rose up within the long-expectant, long-enduring breast. Yonder in the distance came Sholto Hayes, released from his unwelcome detention, rambling the gloomy grounds evidently in search of them. He would speak gladly enough on half the encouragement she had given Dare. They were lost in the dense shadow from the line of elms stretching away at one side, but the first edge of the rising moon was just visible above the horizon, and very soon the lawn would be one flood of silvery light. Dare's quick eye had detected the advancing figure.

"Of course I'll be superseded," he said, in that plaintive accent which gave no intimation of how welcome the prospect was to him. "It's what we all have to expect in this world, where transition comes so easy—where to be 'off' with the old love and on with the new, every quarter or so seems to be the expected result, and quite the proper thing to do. Well, I don't bear any malice, Miss Ferguson, in token of which shall I call yonder wandering, disconsolate spirit to us? Or shall we go forward and meet him?"

This was fairly turning the tables upon Miss Augusta, at the outset. It was wielding her weapon in reserve as an object of offense. She had meant Sholto Hayes as a warning to him of how easily the prize might be lost, and here he was taking his own defeat as a matter of course, from the very start!

"As you please, Mr. Dare," she returned, with marked emphasis. "Or—shall we not stay here and see the moon rise?"

"And have you taking cold in this damp atmosphere? How careless of me not to have observed before, that you were without a shawl. I wouldn't ask to be pardoned if I were capable of detaining you under such circumstances."

The moon came up with a bound at that the great white harvest-moon, and Hayes, espying them, hurried in that direction as they turned from the vicinity of the fish-pond.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," he said, coming up breathless. "Some of the colonel's neighbors have happened in, and Mrs. Ferguson is going to give us some of her exquisite waltz-music; they have cleared out the back parlor, and everybody is wanted who can appreciate the situation, as you can, Miss Augusta."

Miss Augusta lingered, turning to Dare:

"You are coming, of course?"

"Well, no, I believe not. I'm not an ardent devotee of Terpsichore at the best. Just now I have a fancy for a stroll under the moon and stars with a cheroot for a companion."

Releasing Miss Ferguson's fair hand from beneath his arm, and relinquishing her with his own impressive gallantry to the other's charge, he sauntered away into the shade of the elms and was lost to their view. The lady's face was at its haughtiest, the iceberg was at its most frigid stateliness, as she walked back toward the mansion at the side of Sholto Norton Hayes. She was justly incensed at this sudden change in Dare. She had the right to expect more and better from him. It was faintly dawning to her mind—most unwelcome knowledge—that he

had been trifling with her as she had known him to trifle with others while she believed him yet true in heart to her.

If Dare had been wantonly passing opportunities, the more honest if less ardent lover at her side had vainly sought such. He was a rather innocent, rather well-meaning young man. The eighty thousand was full as glittering a bait to his eyes as it had been to Owen Dare, but he had the advantage on his side of honestly meaning to fulfill the part of a good husband, should he succeed in winning. He was not handsome—a chief objection in Miss Ferguson's sight. He was tall and thin and sallow, with sandy hair and a retreating forehead and a large mouth, altogether a very neutral sort of young man at thirty-two. He was not assured, and he did not overestimate his chances, and it was the desperate idea that he might lose by being last which brought his courage up to the point of speaking now, and would have done the same at any previous period of these last two weeks.

He pleaded his cause in hesitating, ungraceful sentences, but with an earnestness of candor which appealed to Miss Ferguson's aggrieved heart.

"I was wanting to say this back at the coast," he said, in conclusion. "I made up my mind to have it over and know what to expect, and I've told you now, awkwardly enough, I'm afraid, but I'm only wanting to show you in fact that I mean all I've said about making you as good a husband as the most of men do make. I'll take it as a great honor if you can say 'Yes,' and I'll not forget how little deserving of such a boon I am."

She knew that he was sincere in that and in his admiration for her. She had style, and beauty of a sort, and eighty thousand dollars, and she could add considerably to his happiness through all these things. Whether she *would* was a question which had escaped his mind, except in the first instance of his gaining her. He could not have chosen a better moment to plead his suit. Her pride was outraged; she had been badly treated, and she never could endure the mortification of having it bruited about that Dare had jilted her at last. He took her hand and she suffered it to lie cold, limp, passive in his own.

He brought a ring out of his left vest-pocket, bunglingly.

"I got it in the hope of this time," he said, and it sparkled on her finger under the silvery moon almost before she knew. She drew her hand away and began to remove it, saying a little confusedly:

"You have taken me by surprise, Mr. Hayes. I—I must have a little time to think of this. If you like, I'll consider it and give you an answer a week from now."

Some vague lingering of the old expectation, the tenacity of struggling hope which will not peacefully give up the ghost after it has been struck its death-blow, caused her to stipulate for that week they were to remain at Thornhurst. In her heart she knew at that moment well as she knew after the week had passed that her answer would be "Yes."

Mr. Sholto Norton Hayes, however, had been sufficiently uncertain to receive this much concession thankfully.

"Won't you wear the ring?" he asked, humbly and entreatingly. "You can give it back to me, you know, if you can't make up your mind to take me along. It would cut me deucedly though, to have it come to that."

They went back to the company afterward, keeping their secret between themselves. There were music and dancing and conversation and enjoyment until half-past eleven that night, at the mansion, but up to the moment when the last guest departed, the house closed and the inmates retired to rest, Dare had not put in an appearance. Evidently the moon and the stars and his cheroot had brought absorbing influences to bear upon him.

Another had watched the great round white harvest-moon come up with its sudden bound. A dark-robed form shrinking in the gloom of her unlighted chamber her hot blood thrilled by the terror and delight of this time beating in burning flushes to her cheeks, herself all ready for her flight with the man she loved. The long, dragging minutes were slowly told. Eight o'clock struck; then the quarter, and the half-hour, and at last nine!

A door opened from her room, and a half-dozen steps led down to the ground. She let herself noiselessly out, listening at every step, and stood still with the gloom of the tangled, overgrown garden stretching before her, the home and the heart whose light and hope she had been until now at her back. Did no secret warning then whisper her to turn from her purpose while there was yet time? Did no thought of the stern old man whose love for her was only equalled by his pride and his stiff, inflexible will, awake some remorseful tenderness which might prompt her yet to put this great temptation aside? Regret and remorse there may have been, but no thought of wavering, no wish to turn back; instead a fierce, unconquerable desire to leave the frowning, dark outlines of the house behind her.

She darted away through the masses of thick foliage, and reaching the gate in the hedge, let herself through, locking it after her. She waited there breathless, her swift, heavy heart-beats almost suffocating her, until a light cautious step traversed the woodland, and Dare stood before her.

He gathered her in his arms, holding her close, and whispering sweet words of affection and promise. Only for a moment and then he hurried her away.

Their walk was a long, swift and almost a silent one. There were scarcely two minutes to spare when they reached the station. Dare rushed into the building, secured tickets, and was back at her side in half the time. There were no other passengers from the little station, and there was no delay of a jostling, scurrying crowd. A door was thrown back, he put out his hand, assisting her into the car.

sat down by her side, slouching his hat low down over his eyes, and turning his face to the shadow against the improbable chance of interested eyes finding him out.

Then, with a shriek, a series of jerks and starts, the train was under way again, a great, black, writhing thing with hosts of fiery eyes rushing out from the little station through the calm, clear, moonlit night. But the two within were rushing into a night of blackness, of pain and misery and horror which neither could foresee.

CHAPTER VII.

FROM THE OLD LIFE TO THE NEW.

The bright August days went swiftly at Thornhurst. The month went out and September came in, and the time flew faster as the date of parting came near.

The fervid August heats were over on the sandy flats of Cape Cod. Life there never much changed all the summer through, and Nora chafed under the monotony as she never had done before. Before this she had been a careless, joyous child, giving little of real earnest thought to her future, dreaming some vague, misty dreams, indeed, all rose-tinged, golden gloried, as the bright, blithe spirit could conjure. She had been content rowing her own little boat out upon the bay, singing the simple songs she had learned at the top of her clear young voice, tending her flowers or wandering the shore, and evading on every possible occasion her share of the household duties prescribed by Hannah. Nora never had taken kindly to domestic tasks. She hated the sight of a needle and deliberately walked over the broom when it was left in her way as a test of her order. But all this was changed of late. She lost her pleasure in the old boisterous sports. She went quietly about her tasks, fulfilling them in a most indifferent way, it must be confessed.

The child was coming round, Hannah said. She'd be a comfort and blessing to them yet, Jabez and her, in their old age. Not but Nora had proved herself a comfort and a blessing to them thus far, but she had been something of a thorn in the flesh as well—at once the tribulation and the delight of their lives.

It was all changed, and Nora felt that she had grown old in this one August past. She had lost something which had made her life all joy and sunshine before; she had lost the freshness of her unlimited faith in mankind. Do not suppose that she was pining in secret, wearing her heart out because of Dare. He had hurt her cruelly, he had struck home to her sensitive heart the first keen pang it had ever known, but she had seen him in his true unworthy light, and she never could have cared for him again, never, if she had even known how much more real earnestness had been in his words to her than in the protestations she had heard him make as she stood concealed in Miss Ferguson's dressing-room at the Brewster Hotel. She doubted if she had cared for him very much after all, but he had hurt her—cruelly, willfully—all the same.

It was the very last day of August that Jabez came home from the town with a lagging, heavy step unlike himself, and a solemn countenance which aroused all Hannah's fears of fever or kindred calamity, and sent her in search of boneset and pennyroyal before he was fairly in the house.

"Do you feel down like, Jabez?" she queried, anxiously. "Be there a something a-hammerin' in your head, or like a buzz-saw a-spinnin'? Hain't you dry and hot, and weak in your legs, and *narry* some?"

Jabez shook his head dolorously, with a glance at Nora.

"Tain't anything of that sort, old woman. Tain't much of anything but that I'm thunderin' hungry and tired in the bargain. Here's the mag'zine for you, Nory; I reckon you'd been hoppin' ef I'd come without i'."

Nora took it, very tempting with its fresh wrapper and uncut leaves, and took herself speedily away to one of her favorite outdoor haunts. Then Jabez, very grave still, stopped Hannah as she was bustling about making preparation for the evening meal.

"We're a-goin' to lose Nory, mother," he said. Hannah looked at him, startled, speechless. She had expected this once, thought it to be inevitable. But so many years had gone by with no note of warning, she had let herself sink into a false security, thinking Nory would never be claimed. She sat down in the wooden rocker, her wrinkled face turning gray as she waited his explanation.

Slowly Jabez brought a letter up from the depths of his capacious pocket. He unfolded it with the great horny hands that trembled, and looked helplessly across at Hannah, a lump of which he was ashamed rising up in his throat.

"Read it for yourself; mebbe you'd better," and he passed it over. "I spelled it out down there to the office. Nory's father is dead, Hannah—died 'way off in furrin' parts, and she's left to a friend o' his'n that's comin' for her. Read it out loud ef you kin; you're quicker to make out words than I be, and 'pear's to me I hain't got quite all the sense of it."

She lifted the letter and read it in a voice which was broken and uncertain. It was from Colonel Vivian, imparting the dying charge which had come to him from Edwin Carteret, and announcing his intention of coming for Nory soon. They might expect him on the tenth of September, and a check was inclosed to provide any immediate necessities she might need for her journey. A kind, considerate letter, alluding in a general way to his plans for the girl. He would take her for a short visit to Thornhurst, then she was to be sent to boarding-school for two years; she was to be educated to the position which was rightfully hers, and he would fill to her the part of a father she had never known. There was also a little note inclosed to her.

They sat still together after Hannah had ceased to read. The blow had fallen which they had hoped might never fall. Nora was lost to them—Nora, the bright little creature who for fourteen years had been their greatest joy. Nora was to be made a lady as her mother had been; she would forget them with the fine friends who would come to her—but no! Nora was not ungrateful. There was comfort in the thought that she would never quite forget the faithful, humble old pair who had loved her as their very own. It was a sorrow come upon them too deep for words just at first, and when Nora came in as the sun went down, she found them sitting together still.

The solemn stillness, and their changed, grave faces startled her. She met their eyes turned to her with quick apprehension.

"What is the matter, Hannah—is Jabez sick? Has any thing happened?"

Hannah looked at Jabez; he made her a sign to answer.

"Something has happened, Nora—something concerning you. You're a-goin' away from us, deary. Read the letter, child; it'll tell you better'n I can."

Hannah choked back a sob as she handed over the letter and its inclosure. Nora, startled, and not yet comprehending, crossed to the open doorway, the red glow of the fading sunset lighting the slight shape and glorifying that silky mass of floating hair. She read the letter through first, then glanced at the note addressed in her name—the name she scarcely knew, which had a strangely unfamiliar sound as she repeated it—"Miss Lenore Carteret." It was in substance not much different from the other, and transmitted her father's tender message. She stood there, watching the rosy light fade out of the sky, not speaking and not moving until a tremulous sigh from Hannah reached her ear. She was at her side in a moment, her arms about the old woman's neck, her fresh lips pressed against the withered cheek.

"Dear old Hannah, darling mammy, you'll be sorry to have me go, I know. I've been a trouble to you; I've teased you and been bad to you; I'm sorry, sorry, now, that I didn't try to do better, Hannah. You don't blame me for being glad of this, do you? I can't help it if it's wrong, and I'll always love you and Jabez just the same. It will be so splendid to go to school, to grow accomplished and refined. There, don't cry, nursie—don't!" Nora's own tears were flowing, an odd combination of happiness over the prospect opening before her and of sympathy in the sorrow of these old friends. Jabez put out his hand to stroke the soft bright hair with his horny palm, and darkness settled down over the three.

On the morning of the tenth day after that another equipage drew up before the fisherman's cottage, no less imposing in its magnificence than one which had fairly dazzled Nora's eyes scarcely six weeks before. But Nora was not dazzled now. She stood in the little porch, a slender figure in the soft, gray traveling-dress she was to wear that day, for Hannah had thought it best she should not go into mourning for a sorrow which she scarcely recognized as belonging to her. Her father was dead, but the Colonel Vivian of her note of ten days ago occupied his place in her thoughts.

She watched the erect, soldierly form as he advanced toward her, her heart fluttering, her breath short, but a moment later she laid her hand in his and looked up into the grand, kindly, rugged old face with frank, fearless brown eyes, quite composed and quite lady-like notwithstanding the fourteen years of her life passed upon this dreary, barren coast in care of a rude fisherman and his wife.

Colonel Vivian, looking keenly at her from beneath his shaggy, snow-white brows, noting her unaffected grace and simple assurance of manner, decided that she was a worthy daughter of his friend, Edwin Carteret.

There was not much to be said, now that the colonel had come. Nora's one little trunk was packed and waiting; her hat, with its floating veil like silver mist, lay upon the table with the little dark gloves beside it. There was nothing more but to say good-by to the couple who had been to her the only parents she had ever known.

Colonel Vivian looked at his watch, told Nora if she did not detain him above ten minutes they would reach Brewster to catch the noon train, and with a few words to Jabez and Hannah strolled down to the shore. He had all of a man's horror of scenes, and did not come back until the last moment, when Nora came out to the carriage clinging fast to the hand of her old nurse, choking back a sob with the stern determination that she would *not* cry, and breaking down at the very last. Her new guardian hurried her into the carriage at that, the last good-by was waved, and they rolled away smoothly over the sands of the shore.

Impulsive as her nature was, Nora was not demonstrative. She shed some quiet tears behind the misty silver veil, thinking of the sad house and mourning hearts she had left, but youth is never very long depressed. Her tears soon ceased to flow, and she glanced timidly at her guardian, sitting, a straight, commanding figure, at her side. Very wisely he had left her to herself at first. Afterward during their journey he devoted himself gradually to drawing her out, studying her nature, enjoying her surprise and delight over the novelties of travel and the sights which were commonplace to him.

They went by way of New York, stopping over a day and a night in the great metropolis. Colonel Vivian had a niece there, a handsome, cultivated woman and a recognized leader of fashion, doomed to seclusion this season by a death in her husband's family. This lady was drawn into immediate service by the colonel. Nora must have numerous expensive additions to her outfit. Wasn't there some place where woman's gear was turned out ready-made, and couldn't she just take the responsibility into her own hand of selecting such things as

might be needed? Mrs. Grahame at first demurred. It was a task which would require a week's time to properly execute, but yielded after a little urging and a small blast from the irate colonel, "just to please her dear uncle," and compressed the week's work into one long forenoon.

On the fourth day, the afternoon train rumbling into Thornhurst station, deposited them, two weary, dusty travelers. The home carriage was there awaiting them, a wide, luxurious vehicle with stately steeds and silver trappings, but Nora had grown accustomed to fine things by this, and sunk back complacently amid the soft crimson cushions.

"This is Thornhurst proper, my dear," said Colonel Vivian, as the carriage turned aside from the highway. "Yonder is the house—you can scarcely see it yet. Welcome home to Thornhurst, Lenore."

Nora roused herself, looking about with a vivid interest in the surroundings of this new home.

"Is that the mansion, Colonel Vivian?" There was an accent of disappointment in her tones. She saw the building quite plainly, a dark, irregular structure, not large, with an air of neglect and decay about it. The colonel's brows contracted as he followed the direction of her gaze.

"Not that, Nora. I would pull that old rookery down fast enough if I had control of it. Unfortunately it stands just outside the line of my jurisdiction. That place is occupied by a Mr. Walter Montrose, an Englishman by birth and education, a Southerner by long residence, and not much credit either to England or the South through such a representative. It was one of the evil effects of the war to drive him into our neighborhood here, as surly, disagreeable a man as I ever care to meet. There is my home and yours to be for the future."

They swept a curve and came into full view of Thornhurst, of the stately mansion gleaming a fair sight in the afternoon sunlight, the wide lawn stretching in front, the gardens melting into orchards, the orchards into groves away at the back. Nora clasped her hands and gazed in speechless delight, and Colonel Vivian was satisfied. A couple of masculine forms strolled out from the shade of the elms as the carriage followed the winding drive which skirted the lawn.

"Who are those?" asked Nora, quickly.

"Those? The one to my right is my son, the other a friend of his, Mr. Owen Dare. Don't look so blank at the prospect of meeting gentlemen, my dear. You'll not be inflicted with their society very long, as they leave together for Europe to-morrow." He sprang from the carriage as it drew up at the door, handing her out with courtly gallantry.

"Once more welcome to Thornhurst, my child. See, that is my housekeeper at the head of the steps. My ward, Miss Carteret, of whom I told you, Mrs. Ford. Miss Carteret will prefer being shown to her own room at once. Try to get a good long rest before dinner, my dear."

The two young men coming leisurely up had but an imperfect glimpse of the little gray-clad figure as it vanished within doors.

"Hopes laid waste," said Vane, in mock resignation. "Ah, well! we can exist till dinner, I dare-say."

For reasons of his own, Colonel Vivian had given only the briefest explanation of his sudden journey. Vane had remarked his untimely absence a little wonderingly.

"I shouldn't have supposed the colonel would have put himself willingly out of the way up to the very eve of our departure," he had said to Dare. "This ward business might have waited for all I can see. However, it's probable the colonel knows what he is about."

The colonel did know what he was about, and it was not his cue to give Vane cause for a suspicion yet.

There was a tap at Nora's door, followed by the entrance of a rosy-cheeked, apple-faced girl, possibly two years her senior, just as the dressing-bell clanged through the still house.

"I'm Martha, the parlor-maid, if you please, Miss Carteret, and the colonel says I'm to wait on you while you're here. You're to be made to look your handsomest to-night, if you please, miss, and leave everything to me. You needn't be afraid; I'm used to waiting on the ladies when they're here. Miss Ferguson would as soon have me as her own maid, any time. Have you the key to your trunk, miss—this one?" singling the larger with a glance, the one in which all the finery procured in New York was stored.

Nora produced the key, asking, indifferently:

"Miss Ferguson? Is she here now?"

"Oh, dear, no, and the more thanks! Gone close upon three weeks ago. A precious one she is to wait on—" and there Martha went down upon her knees and into the contents of the trunk.

"Will I do?" Nora asked, shyly, as she floated down where her guardian awaited her at the foot of the stairs, half an hour later.

"Couldn't be better," he assured her, with an approving glance of his keen eyes, and on his arm she floated further into the drawing-room, and the presence of the two young gentlemen waiting there. She was all in white, with blue ribbons in her hair, but the dress was the finest of Indian muslins, embroidered and ruffled, the ribbons the very best *gross grain*.

"Miss Carteret, Mr. Vane Vivian, my only son. Mr. Dare, my ward, Miss Carteret."

There was a malicious gleam in Nora's eyes, as she observed the surprise of both, the disconcerted air quickly suppressed, of one. They acknowledged the introduction in due form, Vane with that amused, provoking smile, telegraphing a glance at Dare behind the colonel's unsuspecting back. Nora was thoroughly self-possessed. She chatted with her guardian all through the dinner hour, responded freely to Vane, passing a casual remark once or

twice with Dare, but never once betraying the slightest previous knowledge of either.

"A thoroughbred, if ever I saw one," thought Vane, with a thrill of dawning admiration. "Turning the tables on Dare with a vengeance, too; a fair return for his treatment of her. Odd that she should be the colonel's ward."

Dare, amazed and bewildered at first, soon understood the case better. He recalled Hannah's story—her assertion, which had passed for little or nothing with him then, that Nora came of a higher degree.

How fair she looked, how sweet, how tantalizing in her utter indifference, admirably assumed, as he felt it must be. He was not giving her credit for having penetrated to his depth, or overcoming her own folly. Already the security of possession had taken the edge off Dare's passion for the glowing Southern beauty, for whom he had burst all bounds of prudence. He turned even more than his old admiration and recognition of glorious possibilities to this fair, childlike vision.

"How have you taken me by surprise, Nora," he found an occasion to whisper, just before they parted that night. "Is it possible that late prosperity has obliterated your recollection of old friends? I can scarcely reconcile the Miss Carteret of this evening with my little Nora of the coast."

"One and the same person nevertheless, Mr. Dare, but never 'your little Nora,' let me observe. And I should not suppose you would have any difficulty in reconciling the two. A creature of oddities, freckles and red hair is not very apt to change personality all in a twinkling."

"The *deuce!*" thought Dare, as she walked away. "I was right in my conjecture, then. It was she who occupied the dressing-room that day."

"A charming little creature, don't you agree with me, Vane?" asked the colonel after she had taken leave of them for the night.

Whatever Vane's private opinion may have been, it was no habit of his to commit himself very definitely.

"Well, now, that might be a little too sweeping an assertion," he answered, lazily. "Modified a trifle in style and without that flaming mane, Miss Carteret would be rather tolerable, I fancy. Red hair always was my pet aversion, you know."

Unlucky speech! How far from uttering it would Vane have been had he known that Nora, lingering on the wide stairway, had heard the question and stooped low, waiting to catch his answer. She waited for nothing more, but went on to her room, closing the door with unwonted vehemence after her.

"He, too," she said, bitterly. "And I was really almost liking him."

The morrow broke the little household band. The great house was very still after the two young men were gone. A gloom seemed to rest upon it, in spite of the lovely September weather, of the rich harvests being gathered in, of the mellowing fruit, and ripening grapes, and lack of all apparent care to weigh upon its master—a gloom which deepened after a little time when Nora too was gone.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SLIGHT ACCIDENT.

OCTOBER had dropped upon Thornhurst when we see it again. The harvests were all in, the fruit all gathered from the orchards, except here and there where some frost-defying specimens clung to the boughs, from which the leaves were fast dropping in red and yellow drifts soon to turn sere and be scattered to the four winds; the vineyard was a brown blot against the hillside, with nothing left to indicate the purple wealth which had loaded it down so short a time before. Dahlias lifted their blasted heads in the Thornhurst gardens, and every wind sent the leaves flying from the line of elms over the whole wide lawn.

Thornhurst has grown two years older since we saw it last. The mansion is open after being closed half through the summer time. Colonel Vivian is but barely home again, with his ward and a visitor, in the house which has been orderly and still for two dragging years. The colonel had gone for Nora when the school term closed, late in June, and they had passed the summer together among the mountains and at the sea-shore, with a flying trip to Niagara and another up the Hudson, but everywhere carefully eschewing the resorts of fashion and the votaries thronging them until at last they took Newport in their way, according to a previous agreement of the colonel, and brought back along to Thornhurst Mrs. Shatto Norton Hayes.

Nora could not quite let the summer slip by without paying a visit to the little cottage and her old friends upon the coast. She went there from Newport alone at her own request. She left the train at Brewster, and walked across the sands to the little brown cottage which was hallowed in her thoughts yet as "home." So little change was apparent there it might have been no longer ago than yesterday she had gone away. The boat she had so often rowed was rocking by its stake at the beach. Her rose-bush was carefully tended; it had put out a longer growth, and the rough trellis Jabez had made for her showed signs of age, propped up on either side to enable it to withstand the sea-breezes. Hannah sat in the wooden rocker as the slight figure grown taller came in through the open door—sat and looked at her for one second, as she might have looked at any stranger, then, with her hand upon the chair, she rose up trembling, as two soft arms circled her neck, two fresh lips were pressed to her withered old cheek.

"Nora! Is it my own little Nora again?" And that first incredulous cry expressed the real change which had taken place, as Nora found it in the week she stayed. The little brown house was just the same, but it was no longer home. The snows may have lain a little thicker on the two old heads, but a

constraint had come between them and the nursling who had grown up beneath their care. It was not that they had changed. Nora had grown away from them, separated by more than the absence of two years. She had found her own sphere, and never again could she have found even the counterfeit of content in this humble life. Her guardian came for her when the week was ended, and going without regret, Jabez and Hannah felt that at no time, in all the two years, had she been further from them than in this week past. It had been no fault of Nora's throughout. She had been as affectionate as ever before; she had tried to appear unchanged, and it was no fault of theirs that the romping, willful child they had loved was lost to them in this graceful girl, educated and refined, a lady now of whom they stood almost in awe. Nora, truly, but never again their Nora.

The three were alone at Thornhurst, Colonel Vivian, Nora, and Mrs. Sholto Norton Hayes. The latter had been brought along to play propriety for a few days' time to the colonel's ward. Mr. Vane Vivian and his companion Owen Dare were expected home daily now. Colonel Vivian's pride was self-centered, and it would have seemed like no home-coming had he received his son and heir anywhere except at Thornhurst. The whole party would leave very soon afterward. The colonel had accepted the urgent invitation of his niece, Mrs. Grahame, in behalf of himself and Nora, who was to be brought out into metropolitan society early in the season through that lady's kindness. The young gentlemen would take apartments within easy distance, and they would return with accessions to their number for the Christmas holidays at Thornhurst.

It was four days after their arrival that the returned travelers were welcomed home. Nora was in the drawing-room, while Mrs. Sholto Hayes was not more than half through with the mysteries of her afternoon toilet, all alone, when the faint fragrance of a cigar penetrated to her, and a minute later one of the masculine forms she had supposed safely stowed away above stairs, stepped in through an open window, humming in an undertone, but stopping short at the sight of her.

"Really, I beg pardon, but—had I not ought to know that face? Surely this is Miss Carteret, my father's ward. I had really overlooked the probability of seeing you here. Now that I have seen you, aren't you going to shake hands and make friends, and give me welcome?"

He stood before her, changed by these two years, grown older, matured in face and figure, the handsomest man she had ever seen. The smooth dark face was graced by a mustache now, the rich glow had faded from the pale olive skin, the eyes seemed larger, deeper, darker than she remembered them, and Nora could not know that this interesting pallor and somewhat hollow eyes were the results of constant dissipation of the most reckless kind. He had forgotten her very existence—he might as well have said it in plain words as in that disguise. She understood it, and a little bitterness she had cherished against him since their last meeting found expression.

She gave her hand in the briefest of touches, and drew back a step to the window, through which he had passed.

"Of course you are welcome, Mr. Vivian. The colonel and Mrs. Hayes have talked of nothing but your coming for the last four days. For myself"—with a half pause, and a saucy upward glance—"I confess to a disappointment. I had not expected to be quite forgotten. Red hair being an especial aversion of yours, I thought my 'flaming mane' would have served to keep you in some sort of re-collection, though not a flattering one."

"Not like red hair?—well, as a general thing, no! But I hope I was never guilty of the monstrosity of such a hint in regard to your hair, Miss Carteret, I'm willing to avow my mistake and it an exception, if I were. Red is an expressive color you know, Miss Carteret; its language is love. Pray don't make me miserable, and it emblematic of a different sentiment in our case."

Nora resented the careless, familiar address, just the same he had used toward her two years ago upon the coast, and she a young lady, now of his own standing, lacking his prospects of fortune it is true, but knowing herself as clever and as pretty as girls of her age brought up in the circumstances she had but lately found were apt to be.

"I prefer honest hate to the pretension of love, at any time, Mr. Vivian—not that either is to be apprehended in our case of course." She flushed quickly in expectation of the amused smile she remembered of old, but the face looking down upon her was very grave—so grave that she did not quite trust to it.

"And meantime, that is meant as a warning to me. I thank you for that much, at least, Miss Carteret, and devoutly echo your wish that neither extremity need apply to us."

It was on her tongue's end to correct him; she had not wished it, but checked herself just in time, and wondered if he had purposely made his mistake.

"Dare's little friend has improved, that's a fact," Vane was thinking, lazily; "but she seems afflicted with the same infirmity of disposition still which he attributed to her then. 'A little termagant' he dubbed her, I remember."

She certainly had never looked fairer than as she stood here, the slender, lithe form cut against the glowing October tints without, the fair, sweet face no longer marred by tan and freckles and exposure to all sorts of weather, the "flaming mane" not loosely flowing now, but banded in a waving chignon on the very top of the graceful head. She was in a carriage-dress of rich blue, a color and tint exquisitely suited to her, and she held a pork-pie hat with blue plume and a pair of buff driving gloves in her

hand. She settled the former jauntily upon her chignon, and began to draw on the latter, as a rustle in the far distance heralded the approach of Mrs. Hayes.

"You came in here for coolness and solitude, I presume, Mr. Vivian, and you shall be left to enjoyment of the same very soon. I am going to drive Mrs. Hayes through some of the lovely lanes and byways I have been racing through these four days past."

"And I really expect nothing better than a broken neck or limb, Miss Carteret is so remarkably reckless in whatever she does. I positively almost regret having promised to go at all." Mrs. Hayes herself spoke from the doorway languidly, as though the prospect of broken neck or limbs were nothing compared with the exertion of speaking at all. She had passed greetings with Vane and his friend upon their arrival, having lingered below in her most charming morning *negligé* for the express purpose.

"Really, I should like nothing better than to calm your apprehensions by relieving Miss Carteret if she would permit, only I am scarcely in proper trim. If I could trust you ladies to overlook the fact and take me as I am—"

"Don't think of such a thing! I would not permit you or any one—unless it were the colonel himself—to take my dainty Frisk and Flight in hand. New-comers to the stable since you were here, Mr. Vivian, that my guardian has devoted to my exclusive use. Mrs. Hayes need not have the slightest fear; if I am remarkably reckless in all I do, I am also remarkably correct."

Miss Carteret's assertion was in imminent danger of being disproved before the drive was over. She had taken the sweep of the carriage-road, handling the ribbons in an approved style to elicit the admiration of the colonel, himself a skilled horseman and no less skillful driver, as he stood watching: so out of sight through the long avenue leading to the gates. But oh, what an exhilarating breeze it was sweeping up from the valley! How the maple trees hung out their crimson-and-gold banners, glistening under the afternoon sun; how the woods rustled and whispered in all the changing tints which the first few frosts of autumn bring! Like any ardent lover of nature and novice in the art of driving, Nora's vigilance very soon relaxed. The brown eyes wandered away more frequently from the crisping turf of the lane under the feet of Frisk and Flight, eliciting weary monosyllables of assent from Mrs. Sholto Hayes through her own rapturous delight.

But from the poetry to the reality of autumn influences came the swift transition. A sharp, dashing rain of a week before had washed a rut into a gully, and Nora's unheeding eyes just then were watching a flock of migrating birds that sailed screaming over their heads. There was a great jolt, a toppling of the little basket carriage sideways, and Nora came back to a sudden sense of her duty, bracing herself and drawing the lines tight in upon the willing ponies. All might have gone well even then but for Mrs. Sholto Norton Hayes. That lady, roused from her customary languor, went through the invariable programme followed by weak-nerved persons under similar circumstances—screamed shrilly and caught at the reins.

"Sit still," cried Nora to her. "Hold fast to the seat and don't dare think of jumping!"

But the other's movement had turned the ponies' heads, and in a moment more one wheel lay in the rut, and the carriage went down, tumbling Mrs. Sholto Hayes unceremoniously to the ground, but most fortunately Frisk and Flight stood still at their mistress's word.

"You are not hurt in the least, Mrs. Hayes," said Nora, decidedly. "Do get up, please, and go to the house we see yonder for assistance. There, my beauties! you did nobly, but I am afraid to leave you with that wreck at your heels."

Mrs. Hayes, however, sat upon the ground, sighing dolorously, declaring herself too faint and crushed to move. Nora felt very much like flying at her, giving her a shaking and setting her upon her feet, but was proceeding to tie her docile charges to the fence, when a young lady emerged from the cedar grove at a little distance and approached them.

"Is any one injured?" she asked—"this lady?"

"Is not hurt in the least," returned Nora, shortly. "Mrs. Hayes, if you only will get up, you may discover the fact for yourself. The question is, how is this mishap to be remedied?"

"If you ladies will come with me—the horses may be left now, I think—my father and a man upon the place will see what can be done. It is but a little distance there."

She pointed to the house to which Nora had referred where its outlines were darkly defined through wild, untrimmed foliage. The same house she had taken for Thornhurst mansion on the occasion of her first coming there, as she recalled when they approached it.

"What a very beautiful face the young lady has, and how queenly she is! I wonder if she can be the daughter of that Mr. Montrose my guardian seemed to so heartily dislike?" Nora mused.

She was assured of it a moment later. A tall, thin, elderly man, with hard but not unhandsome face, appeared in the doorway—Mr. Walter Montrose. His features were regular, his lips thin and compressed, his forehead slightly receding, his eyes steely blue and keen, his dark hair scarcely touched with age.

"The ladies from Thornhurst, papa," said their guide. "They have met with an accident; their carriage broke down in the lane. I told them you would see if there was any repairing it for their return."

"The ladies from Thornhurst!" Mr. Walter Montrose gave them a keen glance. "Then this young lady is Colonel Vivian's ward? If the accident drove

no serious one, I must rejoice that it brought us this honor. Have you become acquainted with my daughter, miss—"

"Carteret. And I know that this is Miss Montrose." Nora gave her hand frankly, and then introduced Mrs. Hayes in due form.

The accident proved simple enough. A defective nut had given way, but a substitute was found, and in a very few moments the carriage stood in readiness for their use.

"We only stay a few days at Thornhurst," said Nora, as they took their departure. "But I do hope I may have the pleasure of seeing you again, Miss Montrose. May I come again?"

"If you like," and a pleased smile illuminated the dark, beautiful face. Nora would have liked to add an invitation for Miss Montrose to visit her at Thornhurst, but felt she was not at liberty to do so without first consulting Colonel Vivian.

"How imprudent to have associated so freely with those people," reproved Mrs. Sholto Norton Hayes, who had been unyielding as the emblem of frigidity itself, during their homeward drive. "They are low, ordinary persons from all appearances."

"I never saw a more perfect lady," Nora averred, "and Mr. Montrose quite as much a gentleman. I think I never saw more lovely eyes."

"It is an opportunity you must not neglect, Venetia," said Mr. Walter Montrose, watching the little basket-carriage as it rolled away. "Girl friendships are easily cultivated always, and this one will secure you an entrance to Thornhurst."

A bitter smile played over the rare, full lips.

"Did you observe how careful she was not to ask me there? She knew us, and of course knows Colonel Vivian's hearty dislike. I do not see that Thornhurst is nearer than before."

"You must make it nearer," he said, in the quiet, decisive tone from which she knew there was no appeal. "You must make it nearer! Haughty, purse-proud, over bearing people though they be, you are equal to them now, you may be far above them one day, though that is a meager hope. At any rate, never forget what blue-blood runs in your veins, and hold your own with them as you have the right. You can win your own way if you like, and as you must like, after the first. Yes, you must turn this to account and get admitted to Thornhurst, Venetia."

CHAPTER IX.

THE FIRST SHADOW.

THERE was no moon but the stars shone out brightly through the frosty still air. The lights from the mansion had gone out one by one; the gloomy house just without the Thornhurst domain had been wrapped in unbroken slumber for two hours or more. It was close upon midnight, and the whole countryside was brooded over by the silence which the midnight hour should bring.

As silent as the unmoving objects about, as much a part of the dusky night as they, was the dim shape waiting without the closed gate in the high dense hedge. She had waited there an hour, the same patient, silent form. It was the second night she had been at the tryst, and the fear of disappointment for the second time was chilling to her heart.

"He will not come," she thought, drawing the dark mantle she wore closer about her. And at the moment her quick ear caught the crackle of the crisp grass under a footstep advancing through the woodland. She stood still, no evidence of eagerness breaking through the composure she had enforced, but for all that there was a force of passion which might most have astonished the man who was coming, firmly as he believed in her devotion to him. He was there in a moment, his arm about her, his voice tender as it had been two years before, but in that very first moment of their meeting a vague revelation of the change in him struck her coldly. It may have been the influence of her disappointment before, it may have been that wonderful intuition which is a subtler, truer power in woman than the more occult processes of reasoning are to man.

"Faithful to the trust, my Venetia! I almost doubted finding you here at this late hour, and now you do not seem rejoiced to see me as I hoped you might be. How have I offended, Venetia?"

She had drawn a little away from his circling arm; she had let him kiss her forehead but did not offer her lips.

"I was here to a much later hour last night, Owen. And you have not written to me for months. Is it wonderful that your tardiness and your negligence should link as evidence that you have regretted our hasty step of two years ago?"

"That you should doubt me, Venetia! That I should be called to account before ever I receive a welcome! Is that your love for me, my own? The trust between us should be so perfect as never to admit doubt, don't you know that?"

There was plaintive reproach in Owen Dare's tone, that indirect shifting of blame from his own shoulders, which had seldom failed in his dealings with woman kind before this. Women and dogs are the more faithful the more they are misused, but to make the rule good in either case there must be perfect mastery, and however madly she had loved him, might still love him, Owen Dare never saw one moment of his life that he was this woman's master.

"I know there should be strong foundation for such a trust, Owen. I know we should contribute equally to build up such. But if you have regretted anything of the past I am willing to bury it dead as though it had never been!"

"This my passion-flower! This the warm-hearted, ardent girl who promised me so truly when I saw her last—Venetia, I don't know you in the cold-blooded creature talking in such a style—speaking

of burying the past which is not even resurrected to our own knowledge."

"You forget that I number self-command among my other accomplishments, and I have had long months to brood over the probable causes of your silence and apparent forgetfulness of me; and your failure to come to me soon as you were here has not been reassuring."

"My neglect was too faithful exercise of the caution which you yourself were most earnest in urging me to employ. I was fearful of addressing you too often, I trembled with every letter, lest it should fall into wrong hands. And last night, the first at Thornhurst, my absence would have been remarked, possibly suspicion aroused."

"Then you are not changed, Owen? Are you sure, very sure, you have not been won away from me?"

He detected the wistfulness, the willingness to receive his assurance in the perfect faith he had expected from her at the first, and the assurances were not lacking.

"You must promise never to doubt again, Venetia, never even if circumstances should make it appear that you have cause."

"I did not doubt as it was. I never could unless I knew you false, and then—"

"And then, my darling?"

"Only what I said a moment ago. You need never have anything to fear at my hands. If you ever do regret, from that moment you are free as the wind from any claim of mine. I only ask that you shall be honest with me, that you shall never deceive me; that you shall tell me frankly if such a change ever should come."

"And how solemn you grow over it, as if it were the most likely thing in the world! Suppose now that dolorous view you are taking should come about how long before you would be an avenger upon the track, a Nemesis not to be turned aside? If I could prove so weak as to be false to you, you would hate me as fiercely as you loved me once."

"I never should, Owen—loving once I could never hate. I can imagine no wrong so deep that I should ever wish to injure you. I would die myself rather than bring harm on any I ever loved."

"You never shall be tempted by me, at least, Venetia. How we are wasting the precious moments of this precious interview in discussing a possibility which is not even the remotest possibility in our case. May I light a cigar to ward off this chill, or is my respected father-in-law not supposed to be so soundly sleeping but such sacrilegious odor so near his sanctified ground bears the chance of rousing him?"

"There is no danger."

"Thanks." He struck a light, and the momentary blaze showed Mr. Dare's serene eyes looking upon her with a fond glance that went straight to Venetia's heart. If she had doubted before this in spite of herself she did so no longer now. "See here, love," his tone was very excessively tender as he possessed himself of both her hands, "whatever may come up after this—we are so uncertainly situated there's no telling what might arise, you know—never forget that you are my own loyal wife, for better or worse; never let yourself suppose that I can forget it. I only ask you to believe in me. If you have a misgiving let me prove it false until the time when there can be no chance for misgivings, when I can go to your father and claim you for my own, and show a record not wholly unworthy such a boon. Is it a bargain, my wife?"

"I don't think I would wish to live if I ever could lose trust in you, Owen." How perfect her faith had grown, how beautiful, how dear to her heart just then! A few more minutes flew, Mr. Dare's cigar burnt close under the tip of his handsome nose and he tossed it down, tramping the glowing end out as it gleamed wickedly in the frost-spangled grass.

"I'll come to-morrow night if it's for no more than a moment or so, and again the next, and after that we'll probably be off again. I've formed hope through this connection of mine with the Vivians. It isn't beyond possibility that I may be settled at Thornhurst yet as a permanency."

"And that reminds me—I was almost forgetting—I want you to get me introduced at Thornhurst, Owen. There is no reason why I shouldn't be admitted on equal footing with other young ladies of the neighborhood who visit there. You can bring it about in some way, I am sure."

"It is out of the question," asserted Mr. Dare, a little startled, and quite decided. "What put that notion in your head, my dear? The colonel, you know, has some sort of preposterous prejudice against your father, which also includes you, and even if that objection were out of the way, the liberty would not be permissible to a mere guest as I am at present. I wish I could oblige you, Venetia, but it's not possible, you see."

"Then make it possible! It may be out of the question for you to introduce me there, of course I know that, but you can bring the result about through some other source. There is your friend, Mr. Vane Vivian, could manage it, or one of the ladies possibly."

"I don't know; it would be a hard matter if done. It couldn't be much advantage as the family stay there so short a time."

"But they come back for the Christmas festivities which may extend for an indefinite period. It was my father's desire first and it is my wish now, because, Owen, it will bring me nearer to you."

It was by no means Mr. Owen Dare's wish. It was the furthest from his wish in fact, though he did not say so in words. He promised a little vaguely to see what he could do; there was a lingering farewell; then the gate closed after her and he strolled away through the cedar grove, looking up at the calm stars through the interstices and reflecting as he went.

"More liberal than I ever thought she could be," his thoughts ran. "And Venetia means every word she says! I'd lay my head to it, if I were to go back on her now, she'd never peach or give a sign." Mr. Dare's punctilious expression was not always held to strict account in his own self-communings. "Not that I mean to do it, of course not, but it was a rash move to entangle myself completely as I did. I don't regret it and I don't expect to. There is Mrs. Sholto Norton Hayes and the eighty-thousand I might have had—really I am inclined to return thanks for my deliverance. I don't know that I'd absolutely change matters if I had the power now, but by some means I must bluff Venetia off from her notion about Thornhurst. *That wouldn't suit, by any means.*"

As he made his way toward the mansion rising in black outlines against the hill and sky, another face rose up in his mind side by side with the dark, beautiful one which had so lately looked trustingly upon him under the starlight—Nora's face as he had covertly watched it that day, pure, fair, and daintily flushed, wide brown eyes sparkling animatedly, and glowing hair massed about the shapely little head. Mr. Dare felt that his choice had been between two types of such opposite loveliness that it was inevitable that he should regret the one, having chosen the other, and it made but slight matter, as there was no difference in the scale of their worldly possessions, each being munificently dowered with beauty and nothing else.

Venetia went in silently over the leaf-strewn path where the tangled shrubbery brushed her garments on either side, the sweetest peace her proud, tortuous life had ever known resting upon her. It was such dear peace to her whose rebellious spirit had stung her often under the wonderful self-command she had gained. With all the world to choose from she would not have asked more of her own free will just then than this happiness of hers openly acknowledged; all the goods of life seemed so pitiful in comparison!

The warm flush in her cheeks was chilled; a thrill of terror shot to her heart as a dark shadow obscured her way, and in the clear starlight her father's tall form loomed up before her. She did not scream and she did not attempt to fly. She simply stood still and braced herself for the worst of what might come. How long he had been there, how much he might know of her own proceedings, she could not even guess.

"You choose a strange hour for rambling, Venetia," he said, in a metallic tone before which she shrunk. "Not strictly a conventional hour if you will permit me to suggest it. Will you take my arm back to the house, Miss Montrose?"

She permitted her hand to be drawn unresistingly through his arm and walked in total silence by his side. He led her in through a dark passage to a small room, where a dim light was burning. He released her hand and waved her to a chair, but remained standing himself.

"Sit down, Venetia."

The calm, hard face of the man had not moved a muscle, but there was a cold glitter in those steely eyes which was more terrible to her than a belching battery would have been. She knew she had the worst to dread then, and not the least impressive feature in the anger of Mr. Walter Montrose was its terrible quietude. One glance of those cold eyes had power to scathe to the very soul; a half-dozen words in that ringing, metallic tone were more potent than the fiercest tornado Colonel Seymour Vivian could utter.

"I must confess surprise at the discovery of your odd taste, lately developed let me hope," he went on. "A chance discovery brought about through fancying I heard the jar of a door some time since, and a reconnaissance disclosed yours on the swing. You must have been in haste to have left it so carelessly. A glance showed me that you were not in your room; the just perceptible odor of a cigar on the air without guided me to the end of the garden walk. I went, doubting, incredulous. I paused, convinced, at the sound of voices, one of which I distinctly recognized as yours. Look a little less sphinx-like, if you can, Venetia. That is an uncomfortable expression your face is wearing, and nothing is more admirable than studious control of the features to the will. Of course I withdrew to a suitable distance immediately. I had no desire to play the spy upon my daughter's actions; I should be most sorry to lose confidence in her to an extent leading to that. I refer to the matter now, Venetia, to recall certain hopes and expectations of my own which I have taken considerable trouble to impress upon your mind. I have had ambitious aims for you, the nearest to see you installed as mistress of Thornhurst. I am not in the habit of being thwarted, as you know; let me suggest it would not be policy to disappoint me there through any failure of yours. Also it might perhaps be better if these midnight rambles be dispensed with hereafter, though I leave that entirely to your discretion. Only one thing more: if any fancy of yours should raise an obstacle between yourself and Thornhurst, *the obstacle shall be removed*. I think I need not detain you longer. Good-night, Miss Venetia Montrose."

He held the door open and she passed through, not having uttered one word. She went blindly up the few steps leading to her own chamber, with a feeling of suffocation come upon her, a dumb dread which seemed to paralyze nerve and action. He had overheard enough to suspect the truth, if he did not know it; the emphasis he had placed upon the pronunciation of her name at length showed that, and his relentless determination to trample down any obstacle coming before the fulfillment of his wishes. Heaven's ordinance of marriage is not easily set aside, but a dread terror seized her as she thought what other alternative might remove the obstacle.

How far off now seemed the peace and happiness

of the last half hour! how impossible that she should ever feel secure in such again! Venetia Montrose had passed more than one bitterly wakeful night before this; never one so fraught with numb despair.

The question of Miss Montrose's appearance at the mansion had been presented and settled, hours before her own request to Dare. Nora never let grass grow under her feet in pursuing any object of her own, and the narration of their accident was promptly followed by a request for permission to invite the young lady to visit her there.

"Bring the daughter of Walter Montrose here!" vociferated Colonel Vivian. "I'd as soon bring a cobra into the house. Let this settle that question now and forever, Miss Carteret; Montrose's daughter does not set foot within my doors, and you will have nothing to do with her on pain of my bitterest displeasure."

Nora was disappointed keenly, but there was no gainsaying her guardian in that mood—as near an approach to the tempestuous as he often exhibited toward her.

CHAPTER X.

VANE'S FRIEND.

THE metropolitan season opened brilliantly. There was no end of gayeties. There were all the grades of balls, parties, and receptions; there were the operas, the drives on fine days in elegant toilets, the rounds of calls made and calls received, to fill up morning, eve and night, for understand the fashionable world knows no noontime.

It was all very delightful to Nora. She went through the whole course, day in and day out, and never wearied. Mrs. Grahame took her everywhere. The colonel, making a grand figure and nearly as much lionized as a younger man might have been, was very often their escort. Failing him, there was no lack of others. Vane very rarely served in the capacity, and then with such unappreciation of the honor that Mrs. Graham gave decidedly the cold shoulder to the young man and left him undisturbed to his own pursuits. There was a whisper afloat that these same pursuits were not in strictest accordance with the moral code with which society, however hollow at heart, polishes its outer shell. For all that, society was very gracious to Mr. Vane Vivian when he chose to honor its gathering with his presence. But then society has admirably adapted itself to the sort of practice which strains at a gnat and swallows a camel.

Very different in his habits and the spirit displayed was his chosen friend, Owen Dare. It was even a matter of wonder that such a Damon-and-Pythias-like sentiment could exist between such opposite types. Mr. Dare was a most exemplary character. He was also untiring in his devotion, a model escort, and always in faithful attendance upon the movements of the Grahame party. No one was more unconscious than Nora herself of how very marked his attentions had become, and of the rumor which was beginning to link their names with the customary freedom.

There was a question mingled, however. Was Dare at his old game again, or was he really going in for a winning hand, as all appearances seemed to denote? They didn't know that the little Carteret came up to his figure, but of course, being Colonel Seymour Vivian's ward, she could not be of small importance. There was a whisper of those diamond mines in Brazil, too. Trust Dare to know what he was about; he was not at all the sort of man to lose his head unawares, and just there rumor made its mistake. He was not the sort of man to lose his head, but, having lost it, he was just the sort of man to stop at no lengths to carry his own object.

"Such a pity their positions couldn't be reversed," said Mrs. Grahame to Nora, after one of Dare's daily visits. He did not confine himself to simple calls; he came at all hours; he dined with the family; he even breakfasted and lunched with them on occasions; he had managed to make himself indispensable to the colonel as he had become to Mrs. Grahame herself. "Cousin of mine though he be, I can't indorse Vane's doings. I shouldn't like to answer for the consequence if the whole story of his misdeeds were to come to the colonel unawares, and that splendid Mr. Dare wards half the blame away from him and keeps the colonel soothed when he's apt to be furious. I repeat, it's the greatest of pities they are not differently placed. A son and heir of Owen Dare's strict rectitude would be a great comfort to my uncle, while Vane is not likely to prove anything but the opposite."

"Of what frightful things is Mr. Vane Vivian guilty?" asked Nora. "My guardian doesn't see any fault in him, I am very sure. It's nothing but 'Vane' when I am with him, until I fairly weary of the name."

"All my uncle's policy, my dear!" And Mrs. Grahame looked volumes she would not speak, which were Greek to Nora's unsuspecting sight. "As for Vane, he is going the road to ruin fast as any wild young man ever went over it. There isn't an indiscretion in the whole catalogue of which he has not been guilty, so far as I can learn. He is absolutely, criminally reckless in regard to money matters. He has gambled away a fortune in two weeks here, and they say its nothing to the debts he came loaded with from the continent."

"They say! Who says, Mrs. Grahame?"

"I believe Owen Dare was obliged to say it. There was no putting the affair off, and the colonel had to be appealed to. He paid the bill, it was an enormous amount, and swore to disinherit Vane before he would settle another one. It occurred the first week after you came here; I wonder you didn't suspect something of a disturbance, Nora."

"I was too much occupied in my new world, I presume, and the colonel never speaks other than well

of his son to me. I should not suppose he would speak willingly of such a matter to any one."

"You are quite right. He did not speak of it even to me, but it was impossible to keep the matter quiet, and Owen Dare told me the truth of the story to save any prejudice I might gather through a floating, exaggerated report, though how it well could be exaggerated I cannot comprehend."

"It is evident, then, that Mr. Dare himself was in no way anxious to spare you a prejudice. I should consider it a breach of honor to discuss a matter which the parties most concerned would not wish exposed. Possibly, too, Mr. Vivian might put another aspect on the affair."

"Not a more truthful one, I am sure. And the circumstance it seems was not even a warning to Vane. He is wilder, more reckless than ever since that. Think of such a young man running through with Thornhurst and all the colonel will have! Really, if I had a daughter of an age to marry who might choose between the two, I would not hesitate in preferring Dare for Vane's brilliant prospects. With all the property in his hands he would be a beggar in three years, and Owen Dare will build himself up from nothing yet, mark my words. Enough of that subject, however; though I haven't words to express my indignation when I think of my cousin's course. Do you care to go driving this afternoon, Nora?"

"I think I shall not go out to-day. It occurs to me, Mrs. Grahame, that we may not have done all our duty toward Mr. Vane Vivian. Wild and reckless young men have been reclaimed before this—why not again? I think I should like the credit for one returned prodigal laid at my door, and I am going to ask him to take me to the exhibition to-morrow."

"You are going to ask him, Nora!"

"I am going to ask him, Mrs. Grahame. Don't look so horrified, pray. You know he wouldn't ask me in an eternity. It's rather against my hopes that he has so little liking for me."

"I am not so sure of that, but I certainly thought you were particularly averse to him. I am positive I heard you refuse the colonel this morning when he was making arrangements for your going to the opera. 't h Vane."

"That was quite another matter. I don't choose to be bartered by a third person, not even my guardian. Mr. Vivian shall refuse my request or accept it on his own account—not accommodate himself to another person's wishes. He is coming to dinner to-day, coming early he promised, and I am going to get myself up most charmingly for the occasion. I shall make a merit of charity and overcome my dislikes."

"Consult your own taste of course, Nora, though it is not one of Vane's rules to keep a promise." Mrs. Grahame's voice was a trifle chilled and distant. She had meant to give the girl a warning of the reputation her wild young cousin had gained for himself, perhaps to insinuate the truth of the colonel's hopes which her sharp, worldly eyes had penetrated—the hope that through Nora Vane might be reclaimed—and to throw the weight of her influence far as it went on the side of her favorite, Dare. "If you really mean to rush into a Quixotic undertaking, be guided by my advice and begin systematically. Reconsider your decision of this morning and accept Vane's escort to the opera to-night. Too much Clicquot at dinner, followed by copious draughts of *eau de vie* through the evening, will tell on the hardest constitution, and it is not wonderful he has broken under the practices. For my own part I should decidedly prefer him for an evening companion than for an escort for the morning. You would be apt to find him *distract* and unnerved to an uncomfortable degree, for my cousin Vane, among his other vices, numbers the one of very immoderate dissipation."

"Don't tell me anything more just now that's bad about him. I don't intend to be discouraged."

Mr. Vane Vivian proved an exception to his rule by keeping his promise that evening at least. He came early and found Nora vivid, sparkling, brightly joyous, as she always was these latter days. Her dress was pale-blue with a sheen which would light exquisitely, a full evening costume trained and puffed, with pearls, which were the colonel's gift, on her neck and arms and mingled with her ruddy hair.

She came forward as he was admitted in company with Dare to give her hand, while she deigned only a careless nod to the latter. Her first awakening to the real character of Dare had come more than two years before, and she was distrusting him without cause it might seem, but distrusting him heartily nevertheless.

"You deserve an especially warm welcome, Mr. Vivian. You are so chary about claiming many of them."

"My own loss, is it not? And I never gave you credit for observing whether I was present or not."

"You don't give me credit for half I do deserve, but I shall return good for evil by crediting you with more than I've had evidence of—a great deal of gallantry. Of course there's an ax to grind to draw that from me. The truth is our escort for the evening has made another engagement and we want to press you into service instead. The colonel is hard to entice into opera-going at the best, and it appears that Mr. Dare has power to make his promises void."

"That is meant as a reproach and it is not merited, Miss Carteret," said Dare, quickly. "I really understood you had declined going to the opera to-night. You know I could not otherwise have brought myself to break upon your pleasure. Even my business with the colonel could have waited, and the honor of this service should not have been pressed upon Vane if my service could have compensated."

"You're so full of business these days it's little

wonder if the colonel finds you invaluable, Dare. I couldn't wish you to be any thing else since it gives me the pleasure of this attendance upon Miss Carteret. Won't you give me one song before dinner, Miss Carteret? It's extremely selfish to ask it, of course, but I fancy music may have charms to soothe a hungry man's soul well as the savage ear. Imagine a greater savage if you can than a famishing mortal in a drawing-room."

"Not meaning yourself, I hope," she laughed, as they moved away, "or do you never spare yourself?"

"Why should I?" he asked, somewhat bitterly. "Others do not spare me. It's all very proper, of course. To stand well with all the world one wants to be like Dare there, *sans peur et sans reproche*."

She glanced up quickly, but the cloud which had touched it was already gone from the dark, slightly haggard, handsome face.

Dare, watching them, was inwardly furious. He had made his own choice; he had no right to expend even the free admiration he was giving her; his allegiance belonged elsewhere; but for all that he was bitterly jealous of every other man who looked admiringly upon the little girl he had held so lightly once. He was most bitter, most jealous of that handsome, wild young fellow, Vane Vivian. There had been secret envy in his heart always toward this far-off cousin, who had been born to a high place, to all the gold and purple, while he at the very best had been an equal by tolerance, a guest received through their generous hospitality who was not grateful, who was venomous in the secret hate he cherished. Such the Pythias of this modern brotherhood!

"You have been ahead all your life," thought Dare, his moody glance following Vane. "Once ahead is not always ahead, however. There may be a turn of the scale sooner than you think, and, with the power in my hands, no evil on earth could more than wipe out the score I owe you."

An old score long gathering, every sign of which had been hidden by Dare's close, secretive nature, but which he brooded over, and looked forward to a reckoning neither distant nor uncertain. A scheme had been slowly unfolding in Dare's mind during these passing, gay, early winter days—a bold scheme, cruel as fate and almost as certain, with that human sleuth-hound set upon it.

Oh, for the shadows to fall on those two young heads, so close together now as he watched them! Oh, for the torture of that proud heart, so strangely, bitterly disciplined, back in the vicinity of Thornhurst! Oh, for Dare himself, going down into the blackness of infamy to avenge a wrong of his own envious fancying, to gain a point in this life, when all eternity could not wipe out the stain he was indelibly branding upon his own soul!

Vane was the ladies' escort to the opera that night, something to Mrs. Grahame's surprise, and more to her indignation. Miss Carteret's whim had taken more speedy shape and action than she had anticipated, and Mrs. Grahame was duly scandalized, as any conventional matron would have been, at the *outré* conduct of Colonel Vivian's ward. No one else thought it *outré*, it is safe to presume. There were a score of young men in the crowded auditorium who would have given much to stand in Vane Vivian's shoes that night, sins, shortcomings, enticing visions of *maria a potu* and squandered estates in prospective—one and all. Among them a half-dozen who would have punched the presuming puppy's head, provided they could, in a close match, with his well-developed muscle, if by so doing a single smile might have been won from the reigning belle. But only one, who came in late and watched her, furtively, more than the play, would plot stealthily and execute faithfully, to work out the end he sought.

The evening brought a small triumph to Nora. Her heart was in the mission she had undertaken, and she played her card so cleverly that Vane himself proposed the exhibition, and begged her company there on the following day.

He was neither unnerved nor *distract* when he presented himself the next morning. This past night had seen him in a spot which of late had known him but seldom during the hours of darkness, for but brief intervals at any time, his own well-furnished apartments. He had slept sweetly and peacefully as a child all the night through. And in another room which joined, Dare had lain awake, brooding, motionless, until the gray dawn had crept sluggishly into the murky streets, and the first stir of the day began.

Vane and Nora had agreed to go early to the academy where the exhibition took place, in time to avoid the throng of afternoon visitors who would crowd there. The hall was comparatively deserted, a few groups scattered here and there, a few strolling singly or in pairs, the soft radiance falling over the pictures on the walls, bringing them out in vivid tints.

They had made half the circuit, surprising each other by their sympathetic appreciations, when Vane stopped short, turned and looked earnestly at a gentleman who was following them leisurely up the hall.

"Wait here a moment, Miss Carteret. That is some one I ought to know, though by some means he seems deucedly out of place here. Not the sort of man one is likely to forget—by Jove!"

He was gone from her side with a sudden start, and a dozen steps in advance the two young men met with a warmth which almost brought a smile to Nora's lips.

"Talk of exuberant expression among women after that," she thought. "What a fine-looking gentleman the stranger is, not so handsome as Vane but so frank and manly."

A tall, broad specimen of manhood he was with straightforward, bright blue eyes, light-brown hair, cut close to his head, and a curling beard, bronze-

bright in the morning sunlight. He was very plainly dressed, but she had time to observe how white and soft his hands were, and that a ruby ring burned upon his little finger, before they approached her.

"Miss Carteret," said Vane, flushed with pleasure still, "allow me to present a friend, Sir Rupert Archer—Sir Rupert, Miss Carteret. The surprise of this meeting has thrown me off my balance, I believe."

Nora managed to respond to the introduction creditably, though such unexpected facing of nobility almost took her breath away.

"Sir Rupert was the very best friend I had abroad first in London, but afterward at Rome, Florence, and Naples. I couldn't believe my eyes at seeing you here. Just come, did you say?"

"By the last steamer, and I am overjoyed at this meeting as you possibly can be. You are the first lady I have spoken to since landing, Miss Carteret, and Vivian's the first familiar face I have seen. I have an appointment to meet a friend in—let me see—just half an hour from now," consulting his watch "and strolled in here to pass the intervening time."

He lingered for ten minutes, talking mostly with Vane, addressing some remarks concerning the pictures, the morning, the great metropolis, and the voyage over to Nora—such things as people speak of casually, but in that ten minutes Nora decided that she should like this Sir Rupert Archer, Vane's friend.

The two gentlemen changed cards at parting, and afterward Vane waxed eloquent over this same Sir Rupert, until Nora almost forgot the purpose which had been first in her mind when she left home that morning. He caught her eyes turned to his face wistfully as it came back to her, and broke off in the middle of a strain.

"You look as if you wanted to tell me something, Miss Carteret. I have been too elated myself to attend properly to your pleasure, I am afraid."

"I do wish to speak to you, to tell you something I fear, and I may not have another opportunity. I wanted to warn you against Owen Dare. I feel certain, somehow, that he is not acting fairly by you. I believe he is trying to make trouble between your father and yourself. I am sure he is not your friend, as he pretends. It must seem presumptuous for me to say this to you, but I believe it, and wanted you to know."

"My dear Miss Carteret! Dare not my friend—Dare make trouble! I thank you sincerely for your good intentions, but you are laboring under some great mistake. You can't know how faithful Dare has been to me."

"I know he has seemed so, but he is a hypocrite, I do believe. Would it not be better to go to your father yourself than to trust any go-between?"

Suddenly the haggardness which had been lifted from his face came back to it. Nora was chilled at the change; it put such a distance between them where they had been so near a moment ago.

"It is not to be expected you should understand these affairs, Miss Carteret. You are mistaken regarding Dare—you do him injustice. Think hardly of me as you like; you can do me no injustice. Shall we go home now?"

"You are not angry that I have spoken?" she asked, timidly.

He looked down at her, his face softening.

"Angry? no. God bless you for it, Nora. But you can't know the kind of hell I am in!"

CHAPTER XI.

AN OLD ADAGE VERIFIED.

SIR RUPERT ARCHER was the sensation very soon after that. A handsome young baronet with a yearly income of ten thousand pounds, and an estate in Sussex, with wonderful reports of its extent and magnificence floating in the charmed atmosphere he frequented, was a worthy acquisition to New York upper-tendom, and it was not long before Sir Rupert Archer was actually embarrassed from the manner in which he was besieged on all sides.

"For a young man of ordinarily modest pretensions, this is proving rather too much notoriety," remarked the baronet to Vane Vivian, as they sat smoking together in the apartments of the former. "See that stack of cards and scented, rose-tinted notes, will you? Most of them from people I've never seen and never care to see. Why the deuce couldn't I have avoided this season of yours and timed myself to my real object in coming—a grand buffalo-hunt on those wide Western prairies. I might as well have gone to Brighton, at once, as to cross the Atlantic the last of October. I go to the country for a week, fortunately. I couldn't answer for my own sanity under an unbroken strain like the fortnight past."

Will you always be the same unpretending flower, Sir Rupert? This is of a piece with your running away from a party of American tourists at Florence who fell in love with you at first sight, and were determined to make a lion of you, willy nilly."

"I haven't your bravery, Vivian, as exhibited then or now. I'll never forget your coolness displayed in rescuing me from that nest of brigands I walked into with open eyes."

"A remarkable feat, wasn't it, after you had held your own against eight of them for a good half hour, dropped three, and would have routed the rest but for their hope of reinforcement. The cowardly rascals never waited to look behind them when my seven-shooter opened on them from the rear. I remember you declared you would rather face the same situation over again than be dragged back to that tourist party in Florence."

"Notwithstanding which you were relentless in dragging me back. And, speaking of constitutional modesty, you certainly have your own share of it. I succeeded in making myself quite interesting to

Miss Carteret, last evening, in relating how gallantly you had come to my rescue, and rendered the important service of saving my—to me—rather valuable life. It appears you had never even hinted the fact among your friends."

"Nothing to boast of, my dear fellow, since, as I remarked to like effect before, you were in the fairest possible way of saving yourself. But now suppose we go back to the original point. You are being bored to death, to take your own word for it, here in New York. What do you say to a month at Thornhurst, where we all go for the Christmas festivities? I've been wanting to propose it ever since we met, but was almost afraid the attractions of the metropolis would prove too great an object against all we can offer you. Thornhurst is a fine old place for all that. Not to compare with your Sussex parks and manors, I dare say, but a spot we are rather inclined to be proud of. There's some game of the smaller sorts, plenty of liberty, and enough of the city element to accompany us, not to mention our standard families there. Do you think you can resign yourself to the prospect, Sir Rupert?"

"Resign. My dear Vane, nothing could delight me more. I can breathe again with that pleasure in prospective, and be reconciled meantime."

"Then I shall report you on the list. Mrs. Grahame and Miss Carteret have both been anxious to secure you among the number of our Christmas guests."

"A pretty little girl, that Miss Carteret, Vane," remarked Sir Rupert, lighting a fresh cigar. "Do you mean to marry her?"

"I? A deuced nice question for you to ask, that is. Ain't I going the straight road to perdition fast enough without dragging a dainty piece of flesh and blood like Nora Carteret along with me?"

"But you might stop on the road, Vivian. Pardon the liberty, my dear fellow, and allow me to say from what I've seen of late I fancy you absolutely need to put a check upon yourself."

Sir Rupert tossed away the freshly-lighted cigar and stood up, dropping his hand affectionately upon the other's shoulder.

It is not the habit among men to interfere with one another's pursuits, whether of business or pleasure or licensed vice, and Vane Vivian knew only the sincerest depth of friendship prompted this approach to remonstrance. He was not untouched by it, but habit is a strong master, and he only answered, carelessly:

"You never were more correct in your life, I dare say. I haven't a doubt but I'll find a check sooner or later. The path I've been traveling of 'reckless days and restless nights' is apt to lead somewhere, and I'll find the end of it at the appointed time. By-the-by, don't let any consideration for me stand in the way if you've any notion of falling in love with Nora yourself, Sir Rupert."

They were both at a brilliant dinner-party given by Mrs. Grahame that same evening, in honor of Sir Rupert himself. He would leave for a short trip into the country on the following day, and Mrs. Grahame had determined that the dinner should eclipse anything of the sort which had gone before.

Nora was at her fairest, as the baronet leaned over her chair during the evening, for Miss Carteret was an exception to the modest Englishman's general avoidance of the sex. A very pretty, attractive little girl, this Miss Carteret was, and her greatest charm, in his eyes, was her lack of all affectation, her natural candor and truthfulness.

"I never was more delighted with any young lady in my life," Sir Rupert mused, running his fingers through that rippling bronze beard, looking down upon the bright, graceful head, the fair outline of face, and snowy throat. "And yet I am not the least in love with her myself. She is not at all after my ideal—that is, the ideal I have pictured dimly as some day filling the vacancy at Archer Hall. But I believe in my soul it would be the salvation of Vivian if he once came under the influence of this brown-eyed fairy."

"Sir Rupert Archer, where have your thoughts gone, pray? Are you aware that you have been answering my remarks quite indiscriminately—that you said 'yes' to my twice-repeated question of your opinion regarding Nilsson, and 'very fine' when I asked if you intended visiting Washington during the session there? And you were looking at me as though you might have been gazing 'down the corridor of time,' instead."

"And I have left my impression there quite ahead of time. I was not aware I had fallen dreaming, but you American young ladies are so remarkably wide awake that I must look sharp after myself. Has Vivian told you that I have accepted his invitation to go to Thornhurst?"

"I have scarcely passed three words with Mr. Vivian all the evening, but Mrs. Grahame found opportunity to whisper the glad tidings. Let me commend the excellent taste you have displayed, Sir Rupert. New York is delightful, but Thornhurst surpasses it. There is only one drawback to my perfect enjoyment at either place."

"And that is?" he asked.

"Owen Dare. That man is coming to be the *lebe noir* of my existence. Sir Rupert, do you imagine the influence he contrives to exert over Vane is for any good?"

The brown eyes looked up at him a trifle anxiously, while the dainty flush in the sensitive face deepened perceptibly.

"Really, I have not given Mr. Owen Dare credit for exercising any influence over Vivian. Vane is not the sort of person to be easily influenced. I confess that I never took particularly to Mr. Dare, however, not even when I saw more of him than I have done here, upon the continent."

"I am morally certain that Owen Dare has some deep-rooted spite against Vane. I know him to be a hypocrite; I believe him thoroughly unprincipled."

I have caught him once or twice, when he thought himself unobserved, with a look in his eyes, not a pleasant look, and one I am sure which bodes no good to Vane. I tried to warn him once, but he would not listen to me. You are his friend, Sir Rupert; if any one can counteract Dare's influence, you can. Persuade Vane to trust less freely in him, to put his loyalty to the test; at least to put it out of his power to poison Colonel Vivian's mind against his son. I believe him fully capable of it."

"Do you fear that, Miss Carteret? That would be worse than any influence he is apt to exert over Vane individually. I cannot imagine any good to come through warning him, however. Vane is one of those impulsive mortals who will stand by a friend the more faithfully for believing him maligned. We must hope it may not prove bad as you fear, Miss Carteret."

At least there was comfort in the fact that he had not totally ignored her cause for fear, as Vane had done. There was comfort to Nora, also, in the knowledge that one person besides herself did not "take particularly" to Owen Dare. All the rest, the colonel, Mrs. Grahame, Vane himself, considered Dare immaculate.

"Sir Rupert!" It was Mrs. Grahame, gliding up to interrupt their *tele-a-tete*. "Here are some of my guests absolutely complaining they have not had a glimpse of the English lion yet. Nora, if you must monopolize Sir Rupert, you should choose a more prominent position, and so gratify the laudable curiosity of our friends. Indeed, I must veto sequestration such as this."

And Mrs. Grahame swept the baronet away from the quiet corner to take up the *role* he protested against—the lion of the evening. She was back, however, in a moment, before Nora had stirred from the retired spot.

"What has Sir Rupert been saying all this time, Nora?" she asked, sinking down into the vacant place. The natural failing of the sex, inquisitiveness, was about the only failing which strict conventionality had not crushed out of that exemplary matron. She also had a very thorough respect for aristocracy, titled aristocracy in particular, and, aside from her favoritism for Dare, nothing could have proved more gratifying than for "the fairest debutante of the season, Miss Carteret, so ably chaperoned by the stylish Mrs. Grahame, you know," to make the brilliant match of the season by securing this wealthy nobleman.

"Well, for one thing, we were speaking of Vane."

"Really, Nora, it would appear in better taste if you did not so persistently make that unhappy young man the chief subject of your conversation. You may rue your open—hem!—regard for him sooner than you can suppose now."

"It appears to me that Vane is much the better for his association with Sir Rupert."

"Simply the reflex of what association with a gentleman of Sir Rupert's culture and standing cannot fail to impart, no matter how unworthy the object may be. I have it from the best authority that Vane is in desperate danger of winding up his own career on the shortest possible notice. He is getting himself hopelessly involved again, and as patience cannot last forever, he will very probably find the colonel's quite exhausted by this time."

"Your 'best authority' being, I presume, Mr. Owen Dare. That incomparable individual, as it chanced, formed the chief topic of our conversation on this occasion."

"A much more proper subject than the other, my dear. I can imagine you finding plenty to say of Owen Dare. Well?"

"Reversing his own particular rule, it was nothing good of him. Sir Rupert apparently agrees with me in my appreciation of the gentleman. When the bottom of these reports regarding Vane is sifted, if it ever be sifted, you will not find Owen Dare blameless."

A moment after, when both ladies had deserted the half-concealed nook, a curtain near wavered and parted, and Owen Dare himself stepped from the snug concealment where he had listened to the whole free discussion of himself. The old adage that listeners hear no good of themselves was never more forcibly exemplified.

"Encouraging to a man of my hopes," thought Dare, following Nora's retreating form. "Positively, the little witch never looked lovelier than when she was denouncing me. And it will be a triumph I wouldn't willingly forego to break that fiery spirit to my own wishes. Sift to the bottom if you like, Miss Carteret, but never imagine Owen Dare so incautious as to be found there."

While many were rejoicing over the advent of Sir Rupert Archer, there were two seriously disconcerted by it—Dare himself, and Colonel Vivian. The first, not quite at ease before the honest, keen-eyed baronet, was bitter at knowing the other's depreciation of himself; a little fearful, too, of putting himself in league against the Sussex noblemen—before the end. But a glance at Nora was enough to nerve him. "Help me, my clever genius and best ally—the devil—against all the world for her and Thornhurst!" So thought Dare, shutting his teeth over what was an unuttered vow.

The colonel was influenced by no prejudice against the young Englishman. On the contrary, he was strongly impressed in his favor, and proud of such a friend for his son.

"But he'll be marrying Nora out of hand, confound him," the colonel mused, "and my plans knocked to nothing. I can't trust affairs to run their own course, as I first intended. Vane must be brought to time, and that soon: this promise of the baronet's to go to Thornhurst makes it evident."

Between those two and all concerned it was a most unfortunate circumstance that Sir Rupert Archer was engaged to go out of town on the following day.

CHAPTER XII.

A PATENT PROPOSAL.

"THERE'S no denying that you've been going straight to the devil for the last three years, Vane. I can't say that I blame you so much for a little wildness. Young men of the day and your expectations manage to put in a pretty heavy crop of wild oats generally. But I tell you I've made up my mind, once for all, that you've come to the end of your tether."

"Quite a familiar remark, sir. This is the third time you have made it in the most decided manner."

The colonel had come to this interview firmly determined to be moderate, to keep his unruly temper in check, and already that inflammable attribute was ready to take fire on the smallest provocation.

"I'll be hanged if you don't find that I mean it at last, sir. I've borne with your unfilial conduct, with your open disregard of my commands, for the last time, I tell you. I gave you an inkling of what my expectations were when we talked of these affairs before. I can't say whether you've proved yourself more obedient in keeping clear of these accursed gambling hells and throwing your betting book into the fire, as I very strongly advised, or if you have kept your own course and got into some new trouble since. For your own sake I prefer believing the former."

Colonel Vivian had a shrewd suspicion that Vane had not so completely reformed but his own favor might be of considerable importance at this present time. He had been indulgent; he had paid Vane's debts twice, and had sworn roundly that not one penny more of his should ever be devoted to the same purpose; but it was a characteristic of the colonel's never to mean one-fourth of what he said, and during the past night he had laid in his bed revolving how he might raise any obligations since incurred in a private way provided the young man fell in readily with his wishes. For the present he was willing to ignore the possibility of any demand upon him.

"It's quite time you are settled down for good, Vane. It's time, too, you are thinking of bringing a mistress to Thornhurst, and the two conditions will work smoothly together. Marry and settle, and be done with this rattle-brain period to which you have given full enough of your manhood."

"By Jove you put it strong. Wouldn't one of those conditions be enough to begin with?"

"Be serious, Vane. I never was more earnest in my life than in proposing this. The sooner you are settled, the sooner Thornhurst gains the mistress it has long needed, the better for you and the more pleased I shall be."

"Since you appear to have bestowed thought upon the subject, sir, perhaps you have already selected a mistress for Thornhurst."

There was no mark, either of compliance or dissent, in that indolent tone of Vane's. He had a thorough respect for his father, but no fear of him, and had learned to meet his blustering moods in a non-committal, unimpassioned manner which generally gained the best of their differences in the end.

"You are quite right, Vane. There is but one person I would willingly receive in that capacity. I had hoped you might make the discovery of her fitness for yourself, and spare my interposition. The one person is Nora, and I have set my whole heart on the consummation of this match."

"Very unwise, my dear father, to set your whole heart on anything in this vale of tears," said Vane, in that still provoking tone. "Marry Nora," he was thinking. "Well, why not? If he were only free of these Shylocks who would not spare one single drop of his heart's blood in pressing the fulfillment of their bonds, such a prospect as this his father was proposing might have seemed quite as enticing as any other which could have presented. At three-and-twenty Vane Vivian honestly believed he had lived out all that was worth living; henceforth he might drag a tolerable existence with prime cigars, the best of old wine, a sight of the reigning prima donna now and then, and a yacht for summer sailing as the chief inspirations to make life durable. A pretty, affectionate wife, such a bright little creature as Nora, would not be a bad addition to the list. It would hardly be just to her, Vane thought. He had taken that question home to himself before ever they came to Thornhurst at all. He thought of it in the cool, shadowy parlor of Thornhurst, that sunny October day of his home-coming. Nora had burst upon him, a bright, enticing vision even then; he had looked the not unreasonable probability of falling in love with her full in the face, and looked it down with the hard, stoical reasoning with which he was in the habit of crushing out his sentimental impulses.

A nice, spirited little thing, one that he could admire in spite of his aversion to leonine locks, and one who was deserving of a far better fellow than he was apt to be for a husband. As to trifling with a natural thoroughbred like that, well, Dare had tried it on once, and seemed to have been worsted in his little game. No, he would look at and admire her as he might watch and admire a dainty, vivid, joyous humming-bird, culling its sweets from every fragrant flower, but as love and marriage were not for him, Nora Carteret was safe from all devotion at his hands. The situation reviewed itself before his mind as he sat there before his father. He was no more worthy of her now than then, not so worthy, indeed; he had been making a rapid descent over the road which leads opposite way from heaven; he had not even paved the way with good intentions. By far the pleasantest time in the six weeks since they had come to town was the last fortnight, during which time, being much with Sir Rupert Archer, he had in a measure cut about from the

dangerous pleasures that had been wonderfully potent with him, for three years past. But Nora had learned a truer appreciation of him in this time. Mrs. Grahame had not left her in ignorance of his faults and follies, to call them by no harsher name, and she had exhibited faith in him after all. Suppose he should present himself just as he was, and as she knew him to be, ask her to take him for better or worse, and make no strenuous efforts to bias her inclination? Would that be doing her any injustice? Something more than its usual warmth beat into Mr. Vivian's heart, as he was inclined to reason a negative.

Unlucky that the colonel's temper gained the ascendancy again. He was aggrieved at Vane's apparent indifference, impatient at his long silence, indignant at the slight it seemed to reflect upon his ward.

"It takes you a long time to make up your mind, Vane. Perhaps it will help you to consider that beggars can't be choosers, and that is the interesting condition you will arrive at unless you show some evidence of regaining good sense speedily. Do you suppose I am going to have Thornhurst squandered away by a roistering, dissolute vagabond? I've been too lenient with you before now. You've come to think you can turn the thumbscrews on me to extort anything through this foolish fondness I've indulged too long. By heavens, if you were twice my son and a thousand times more important than you are, you should turn a new leaf to your account right speedily. Take it this way, then—Nora as the mistress of Thornhurst, and through her your only chance to it. Now, what do you say to my proposal, sir?"

There was a hot glow in the colonel's face, and his wrath had overcome all those good resolutions he had held at starting.

"I have this to say, sir, that it quite alters the case!" Vane was scarcely moved from his indifference, but there was an alteration in his voice which should have warned the other. But the colonel was in no condition now to take the warning.

"Ahal! I thought so! You are sensible at least in admitting it just that frankly. It does alter the case, and it is to be hoped it may bring you to a proper consideration of all you have been within a hair's breadth of losing. By George! I'd endow a founding hospital or turn Thornhurst into a home for the distressed, before it should follow the hundred thousand going for the vicious debts with which you have managed to saddle yourself up to this time. Nora is by far the least objectionable alternative, I take it, and I'll be blamed if you seem to half appreciate your good luck, you puppy!" The colonel feeling himself secure in having gained his point, considered it safe to work himself into a white heat now. His wrath was of the effervescent kind, which having got the air, is bound to fizz itself away.

"I want to know, father, if you were quite sincere in what you said just now. Do you mean that you would really turn me out of my inheritance if I fail in this? I don't say that I deserve anything better, but can you mean that you will take another person to precede me in your heart and home, even with the balance of all my faults against me?"

"I mean to say that I shall leave Thornhurst and everything else that I possess to Nora, unless you come to time, marry her, and cut away completely from your past course. You're a lucky dog to save yourself by so fair a way. By Jove, I was in doubt for a time whether Nora would take up with such a good-for-naught! I couldn't so much have blamed her, and she seemed anything but favorable with the hints of your goings on which chanced to reach her."

A swift, an unworthy suspicion dashed into Vane's brain.

"Does Miss Carteret know of this plan of yours? Does she know of your conditions regarding Thornhurst?"

"Nora knows what my hopes are, and she does not know anything of my intended disposition of the property, failing their fulfillment. I haven't seen fit to tell her that, for Nora is too sensible a girl, I fancy, to throw herself away upon such a scapegrace as you would be if left to yourself. Nora's by far too good for you, Vane."

"So much too good that I shall never make the attempt to drag her to my level. It would be a pity to spoil her enjoyment of Thornhurst by the single exception she might find in me. Leave it to her by all means; cut me off without the traditional shilling; I deserve it; I have nothing to say in defense of myself; but I would no sooner try to win Nora Carteret through the mistaken impression that she can gain Thornhurst only by taking me than I would pay the price of Thornhurst by taking her."

Vane rose as he spoke, an indignant flush creeping into his cheek, his eyes lit, his lip curled. A slow purple succeeded the rubicund glow in the colonel's face.

"What do you say, sir?" he demanded, chokingly.

"That I decline the honor of offering myself as Miss Carteret's husband on any condition. She will be readily consoled by the fact of my unworthiness—and Thornhurst."

A volley broke from the lips of Colonel Vivian.

"By heavens, you scoundrel, you will regret this! And it is for this I've borne with you, for this I have built all my hopes for years! Go your own road; take the consequences, and confound you for the worst idiot this side of heaven!" Colonel Vivian did not mean to reflect upon the inhabitants of that celestial sphere, but he was inclined to profanity, and his tongue very often got the better of his discretion. "Take yourself out of my sight, sir. Never set your foot under roof of mine unless you come into possession of your senses and a proper idea of what a son's duty should be. Lord knows I've found small enough comfort through having a son."

"Spare yourself any further reproaches, sir. I

shall not set foot within your doors without an invitation from you, rest assured."

He inclined his head and walked out of the room, upright as the old soldier himself.

"Be sure it will be long coming, you conceited donkey," the colonel flung after him. "The dog, the insubordinate young hound! I'll break him! I'll see if I am to have defiance flung in my teeth like this!"

Nora floated out from the drawing-room as Vane was striding past.

"Why, oh, why that dark'ning frown upon thy brow? Do stop a moment, Vane, if the breeze you are in will permit. I have got the duet we were to practice together."

Vane looked down at her with hard, flashing eyes. He was bitter against her at that moment. Her fair face was a fair mask hiding the mercenary spirit beneath; she had disliked him he remembered now; she had only changed of late, and he had really believed her the frank, childlike creature she seemed.

"I claim the honor of having played my last duet with Miss Carteret; let me hope so at least." He bowed slightly and passed on, ignoring the hand she had put out to him, leaving Nora hurt and wondering.

"He has been quarreling with the colonel," she thought, "but it is no reason he should cut me in that way. What has it been about, I wonder?"

She went back to her music, but it had suddenly lost its charm, and presently she left it to seek the colonel in the library where his interview with Vane had been held, and where he was raging yet like some angry old lion in a cage.

"What does this mean, I want to know Colonel Vivian?" demanded Nora, from the doorway. "There, you needn't tell me; you've been quarreling with Vane. What for, I say?"

The colonel subsided as he always did in Nora's presence, throwing himself heavily into a chair.

"Is that you, child? Come in and shut that door if you like. My head is aching to split now that I think of it."

"I should think it would ache. Now then, what has the trouble been? It's shameful the way you will persist in provoking Vane; you won't even let him be good when he tries."

"The dickens I won't! He's a confounded puppy, Nora, and he don't deserve anything from you. Let him go to the dev—anywhere he likes, as I shall do."

"Now, guardian, you should never let your angry passions rise, you know. Vane may not deserve anything from me, but he does merit some toleration from you. Do you intend to tell me what the trouble has been, Colonel Seymour Vivian, or will you drive me to him? I am determined to know."

"I've done what I should have done ages ago, sent the rascal about his business. I'll have nothing more to do with the scapegrace. I wouldn't turn my hand over to save him from Sing Sing after this."

"But what has he done?"

"Defied all my wishes and gone directly against all my hopes, Nora. He has thrown away every chance I have given him to redeem himself, and now he betrays the last trust I placed in him. He's shaken all my plans; the insolent churl vows I may disinherit him before he'll marry you, Nora, and I'll do it, by George!"

"What? What is this you are talking about, Colonel Vivian?" The slender form straightened, the brown eyes looked amazement full upon him.

"I—hem!—you know what I have hoped for you and Vane, Nora. Lisa Grahame said she hadn't a doubt you would throw yourself away upon him, and I—well, I was sure you cared enough for me, if not for him, to do it; but he don't deserve even a thought from you. There's a deuced sight better fish in the sea that's never been caught."

"Colonel Vivian, do you mean you have been trying to dispose of me without ever asking my consent? In that case I must be eternally grateful to your son for refusing me. You must tell me just how the case stands, and you must make it up with Vane if this quarrel has been on my account. Marry him to me against his will! or with it, for that matter. Thank you, Colonel Vivian, but I never could think of agreeing to such a patent, ready-made marriage, not if I die an old maid, and I do abhor old maids."

CHAPTER XIII.

"FROM THIS HOUR I HAVE NO SON!"

MR. OWEN DARE leaned back in his chair, his toes upon the fender, his eyes very thoughtful and compassionate in expression fixed upon his companion. It was near the close of a lowering, gray, early December day, the same which had witnessed the blast of the preceding chapter. A sea coal fire burned cheerily in the grate, casting a red glow over the two silent, motionless forms. It was a comfortable situation, and one Dare was prepared to thoroughly enjoy for all the tender concern so aptly pictured in his countenance.

Opposite, stretched at length upon a lounge, his head upon his arm and moody face turned fixedly toward the fire, lay Vane Vivian. Dare had found him there, half an hour before, had addressed a few remarks to him, eliciting monosyllabic replies, and then relapsed into the silence which suited best the other's mood. He was the first to stir at last, after waiting vainly for some recognition of the sympathy he had endeavored mutely to express.

"Something has been going amiss, Vane. What is it?" I haven't seen you look so downcast for a month, and, 'pon honor, that dolorous visage is a more suggestive than agreeable sight. What's gone wrong, my dear fellow?"

Vane moved and flung himself upon his elbow suddenly.

"Don't pretend to be a guy, Dare! You know well as I do that people have been saying for the last three years I have gone wrong, and there isn't a doubt about people being in the right of it. The devil of it is, they're ready enough to drive a fellow all wrong, but never willing to help right him again. It's the proper sort of retribution of course, and I for one shall never grumble, take it as a dispensation and all that. Fit subject for the morality of the lesson, am I not?"

"Not in that bitter mood I am afraid." He spoke seriously, putting aside the other's sneering inflection by his gravity.

"Don't you begin to lecture a reform," said Vane, testily. "You asked what was amiss, I believe. Only that I've got into a fix so tight that I can't by any possibility get out again. The colonel has given me my walking papers, or as good, and I may as well be set adrift first as last."

"My dear Vane, don't let yourself grow despondent. The colonel is never as implacable as he appears. He will be the first to make up this quarrel, if it has been a quarrel, mark my words!"

"I know his peculiarities far better than you can, and I tell you he will never see me through this scrape as he has done with others. I have nothing to say against him, mind; the sooner he is well rid of such an unworthy representative the better, and I wouldn't ask him for help now if a word would bring it."

Dare looked at him keenly.

"You don't censure him, but very evidently there is some one you do censure. You are not dealing frankly with me; you have kept something back. My own ability to give you aid is very limited; but, my dear fellow, there is no one who will devote himself more faithfully to your cause. Is that haughty pride going to hold me off at arm's length, Vane? There was mournful reproach and a sense of willful injury in Mr. Dare's tone.

"I think you can scarcely help knowing what has been kept back, Dare. You've been so thick with the colonel and at the house that you were probably taken into confidence. It was hardly friendly not to have given me a warning."

"Now, by George! you are absolutely unkind. I haven't the least intimation of what you intend to convey."

"Didn't you know anything of this plot the colonel has been concocting, his pet scheme of marrying me to his ward, who has ousted me from his affections it appears? You were in love with her once, I remember, as much in love as you are ever apt to get, so I don't expect any sympathy in telling you I have refused her and with her Thornhurst and all its belongings."

"I suspected something of this sort, Vane; I could not help seeing how Miss Carteret has managed to work herself into your father's good graces. My surprise is that she has succeeded so well and so quickly in her cunning game."

Vane's eyes left the fire to rest for a moment upon Dare, in cold questioning.

"You appear to have misunderstood me. I mentioned it as the colonel's scheme. I absolve Miss Carteret from any active share in it. It is simply a plan to reform and domesticate me to the approved state of the animal, man, but I have an objection to being disposed of in that way, unfortunately. I don't deny being cut up a trifle in regard to the result. I am not quite reconciled to being swept out of my place so unceremoniously, but in the abstract it is precisely what I deserve as I have taken occasion to remark."

"A moment ago you 'found no fault' with the colonel; now you 'absolve Miss Carteret,' and it is very clearly evident that cause for censure lies between them. I can look at the affair with more impartial, more just eyes than you, my dear boy. I tell you I suspected it before. A man in that young lady's position would be called a fortune-hunter, almost any other woman an adventuress; but it is best for you to see the matter leniently as you can."

"Upon my word, I supposed you would be ready to jump at the nearest chance of getting her, and here you are traducing her until I'm obliged to speak in her favor."

"I have admired Miss Carteret, Vane. She is no worse in her sphere than I have been in mine. We are both poverty's favorites, and she is not so much to be blamed for aspiring to Thornhurst. You'll never know, until you have been there, the misery of knowing yourself habitually hard up."

"I'm apt to find it out soon enough. And there is a difference between this case and yours, supposing of course you allude to your interest in the Ferguson-Hayes affair. The gushing Augusta flung herself and her eighty thousand fairly enough at your head. I am not so liberal as to care nothing for the threatened loss of my inheritance, but I am worse hurt at finding myself supplanted in my father's heart. I have been lying here all afternoon looking my own situation in the face, and I tell you it is hopeless. You had better cut adrift from me with the rest in time to save yourself."

He was relapsing back to his first morbid indifference. The hard thoughts which were keeping him company had brought visible lines into the darkly moody face. A desperate man, without hope, that was what Dare saw in him and his treacherous heart thrilled exultingly.

"I have been talking of this freely to you, Owen," said Vane, in something of his old frank, affectionate manner, "more freely than I am apt to ever speak of it again. I haven't mapped out any course for myself yet; but I am strengthening myself in a good resolution never to touch the dice again. I'd vow it by all that's sacred at this minute if I were out of the clutches of the Shylocks. I'm nearly determined as it is to make a turning point if I only

knew how to get the brakes down to the requisite notch."

"You'll come out right yet, my dear fellow. Don't despond just now; the colonel is sure to relent, however hard he may seem, and his ward is tolerably sure to overreach herself if she counts on his rash threat of to-day. Take my word for it, Colonel Vivian will repent his harshness and be ready to retract in less than three days. Rouse up and dress for the evening, Vane. Stir yourself out of this dolorous mood. Suppose we go around to Niblo's for another sight of the Black Crook?—new features in the spectacle, I believe. What's this—Madeira? oh, brandy. As a general thing I wouldn't advise it, but you'll be the better for some stimulus just now."

He had turned to a little stand where a smoke-colored bottle stood, untouched, with glasses beside it. Vane watched him fill one to the brim, and tossed it off when it was offered him with the recklessness which had carried him into excesses often before this. Shadows were creeping thick into the room. Dare applied a match to the gas, and came back to his seat before the fire.

"Shall it be Niblo's?" he asked. "Or have you something better to propose?"

"That as well as any thing. I was about to decline going out, but I have reconsidered. If Sir Rupert were in town now, I'd not be at any loss how to spend the evening."

"Thanks to my patron saint that Sir Rupert is a hundred miles away," thought Dare. "The young idiot would have confided in him rather than me, but for that."

Some hours later they strolled out from Niblo's, arm-in-arm. The evening was not half over, but they had seen the "spectacle" perhaps a dozen times before this, and Vane was too restless to remain quiet long.

"I think I shall go to my room and to bed," he said, as they stepped upon the pavement. "I've managed to work myself into a small fever this afternoon. No, don't call a carriage unless you object to walking yourself."

Dare did not object. They both lit cigars, and the keen wintry air of the streets changed Vane's inclination.

"It's too early to go home yet," he decided. "Suppose we go in here for a moment?"

Dare glanced up at the front of the tall building, which was not lighted, and drew back.

"I hadn't the slightest intention of coming this way," he said, hurriedly. "You had better not, Vane. I've been revolving the question of your difficulties while we were walking here. If you can bring yourself to do it, my boy, why not accept the colonel's terms? It is not too late yet, and in that case it will certainly be better to cut such places as this from the very first. Think, Vane."

"Preserve me from ever thinking, if it leads me to that," he broke out, irritably. "You're a prince of good fellows, Dare. You have never once said, 'I told you so,' since I've got to the bottom of the pit, and no one else ever warned more faithfully than you. I tell you I wouldn't save Thornhurst to myself in that way if a thousand times more depended upon it. I'm going in to try my luck once more, and no matter what the result may be, I swear off against the vice forever after; I can't be any worse cornered, and there's a chance of winning enough to stave along till I get some plan ahead."

Nothing in life worth living for better than his cigars, his wines, his pleasures of the day, Vane Vivian had thought, and here he was hanging his hopes on such a feverish chance as has snapped many a life before now. Youthful vitality is never quite hopeless, never quite willing to give up the struggle, however misdirected its efforts may be.

Dare followed him in through dim passages, where their footfalls were lost in the thick pile of rich carpetings, up some broad, shallow steps, and into a saloon where the burst of sudden light was dazzling in its brilliancy, a lofty, frescoed, paneled room, with a few persons loitering there. There were marble tables scattered about, and a sideboard loaded with glittering silver, where wines ruby and amber sparkled in crystal flagons. Vane approached and helped himself liberally; afterward the two young men passed through into an adjoining room, and here for the first the true character of the place became apparent.

A silence, broken by the sharp rattle of dice, the monotonous repetition of numbers from the near vicinity of a baize door, behind which a faro-bank was located, reigned here. Dare remained in the background while Vane approached one of the tables and flung himself into a vacant place. A player opposite glanced up and nodded.

"Going to take your revenge to-night, Mr. Vivian?"

"Either that, or your friend Moses may mark me off his books as a dead letter."

The other laughed one of those cold-blooded, chilling laughs which should belong to a vampire rather than a man.

"My friend Moses seldom does business in that way," he answered, carelessly. "Young gentlemen of your ilk don't run the risk of imprisonment for obtaining money on false pretenses. My friend Moses is not apt to lose through you, Mr. Vivian."

"He's safe until midnight," thought Dare, from his place near the entrance. "You are in a tight fix, you confiding simpleton, but if you don't find yourself in a tighter one within the next few hours, there will be one more disappointed man than yourself."

Colonel Vivian had just come in from the street, and was divesting himself of his great-coat in the hall, when the bell jingled again, and he turned sharply to himself open the door through which the servant had admitted him a moment before.

"You, Dare," he said, with a breath of relief.

"I've just come from your quarters—from Vane's rather. Where is the rascal now? They told me there you had both gone out for the evening. Great heavens, man, what is the matter?"

He had caught sight of Dare's face in the glare of the hall light, and a great thrill of dread shot to his heart lest something terrible had befallen Vane. Nora had had her own way before their interview of the morning was concluded. She had extorted an unwilling promise from him that he would make friends again with Vane. Misgivings as to the perfect wisdom of his own course had crept into his mind during the day. He meant what he had said in the main. He'd be hanged if he'd retract from a single condition. Vane should marry Nora, provided Nora would take him, of which he was by no means so sure, or he should never set foot upon Thornhurst as presumptive heir. But it had been the worst of policy, he must admit that, to come to an open outbreak with his son. Nora was right so far; he would make up with Vane, recall him to the house again, and trust affairs to come right in the end. Get the boy's anger set—pure Vivian temper he had, and worse than Vivian obstinacy—and Lucifer himself couldn't be expected to foresee what lengths he might take.

Owen Dare had very obedient facial muscles at his command, and his countenance at first sight was pallid and startled to a degree which might pardon the colonel's ready fear.

"Nothing to alarm you, Colonel Vivian," he answered, composing himself as if with an effort. "You have just come in. Put on your coat again and come with me, sir. Nothing—no harm that is—has happened Vane, but I think you had better come to him. I will explain on the street, and let me suggest it will be needless to arouse the ladies' anxiety."

The colonel had made a motion to approach the drawing-room door, but turned back, resuming his great-coat and hat.

"Now then," he said, huskily, and went out attended by Dare. Notwithstanding the latter's assurance that no harm had befallen Vane, he felt it was a sophistry to calm his fears, and his rush of remorseful emotion in that moment was a keen agony, before which the old soldier shrunk, he who had never quailed before bullet or sword.

"Tell me what it is—the worst," he demanded, as they descended the steps, with almost a groan. "What has my unhappy boy been doing, Owen?"

Before the colonel's shuddering inner sight was a picture of his son, limp, lifeless, with a pistol by his side and a bullet through his skull—a suicide. Oh, why had he not thought sooner of the probability of such a result? He felt like a murderer himself, but he was straight as any oak, showing no trace of emotion, except in his pale, set features.

"You are unnecessarily alarmed, Colonel Vivian. You are fancying Vane has done himself some harm but he has not—yet. I fear he is in just the state to do so, and that is why I failed to consider his wishes and came for you. I found him in a desperate, moody frame of mind this afternoon. He has been drinking heavily since, and I left him in a gambling hell, where he insisted on going, I believe with the idea of retrieving his late losses, or ending all on the spot." He called a passing hack as he ceased speaking. The two got in, the vehicle rolled on its way down-town, and scarcely another word was exchanged between them until they reached the tall, dark building whose portal had opened many a time too often to Vane.

"Will you pardon me if I advise you not to judge him too harshly?" said Dare, then. "I don't know how true it is, but I heard some one in there say he had been raising money on a post-obit in your name. For Heaven's sake, don't let any whisper of a disturbance get afloat if the worst I fear be averted; those fellows who have him in their clutches are merciless as death. Come; we can't be near him too soon; and if he appears much excited, be cautious about presenting yourself suddenly, sir."

An oath, more frightful than even the colonel's oaths generally were, was crushed between his set teeth in a fierce mutter, an utterance which Dare discreetly failed to observe.

Vane had been raising money on a post-obit. He had been counting on his death as the price to relieve him from the results of his own wicked folly! So help him, angels of heaven, and demons of the bottomless depths of the bottomless pit, he would never relent now, had he ever been inclined before. From this hour he would recognize no son.

The thick, grizzled mustache quivered for one instant, the sharp agony of bitterest disappointment pierced his soul! Could it be his own son, the brave, bright, willful boy he had idolized despite his grave faults, bartering the chances of his life, considering the father who had loved him with unwise tenderness as nothing by the side of his own pleasures and vices? It was a trace of weakness passing swiftly, which left the colonel hard as iron, his features locked in an icy calm more terrible in him than the utmost passion of rage.

Unconscious of the impending thunderbolt, Vane Vivian was playing recklessly, losing heavily and steadily.

"Bad luck, to-night, Mr. Vivian," said the vampire opposite. "Do you double again?"

"Double!" The cards were dealt, there was a breathless moment, and then Vane flung himself back, with a bitter curse.

"You have lost again," said the vampire, with a scarcely concealed sneer. "I'll take your note for twenty thousand, Mr. Vivian."

"You've taken all you'll ever get from me," cried Vane, hotly. "I swear I'll never touch a card again while I live."

"What has he lost?" asked the soldierly old gentleman, who had just entered, in a constrained voice

of one of the crowd of bystanders who had been watching the game.

"Mon Dieu! twenty thousand at von seeting," said the other, with French shrug and accent. "Two times more and ten, fefty thousand on ze books of what you call 'our friend Moses.' Ciel! ze young Americaine von extravagant gamester."

"It is hardly in honor to refuse giving your note, Mr. Vivian," cut in the sharp tone of the vampire.

"Take it and welcome if you care for that much worthless paper," retorted Vane. "I tell you you've plucked me of my last dollar. Neither you nor your friend Moses are likely ever to see the color of your money."

The sarcastic laugh of the latter was cut short by a voice, deep, stern, changed almost from recognition to the familiar ears it fell upon.

"This young man has spoken the truth if he ever did in his life. If you have claims on him, take them out of him the best way you can. I swear not one penny shall be extorted from me to save him from perdition! From this hour, I have no son! Not one tithe of all I own shall ever go to him; he is no more to me than the merest beggar in the streets."

Vane wheeled, and for one instant saw the colonel's face, unchanging in its rigid pallor, in the strange, quiet sternness come upon it. For one instant; then the colonel turned and walked away without even vouchsafing him a glance.

A dizzy blindness rushed over him; a sea of red fire swam before his eyes; he raised his arm with uncertain motion. Dare, who had pressed to his side, knocked up his hand, and a bullet shivered a ground-glass shade over their heads.

"Not that yet, my friend," said Dare, coolly, possessing himself of the pistol which fell from Vane's unnerved fingers.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE RECEPTION.

It was past eleven when Colonel Vivian returned to the house. The brave old soldier's step never faltered, his tall form was erect as ever, but the sharpest thrust of all his life had been struck home to him. He went on to his room, and it was only by the merest chance that Nora had a glimpse of his face, set, rigid, deathly pale, as it had been under the glare of the gaslights in the gambling hall.

The family had not retired, but she had withdrawn from the parlors and gone above stairs when the colonel's familiar tread sounded in the hall, and she waited in her open door. That sight of his face gave her a thrill of dread and awe, and he passed without seeing the slight form leaning against the lintel, so near that she might have touched him.

"Something has happened," thought Nora, withdrawing slowly into her room. "Something has happened, and it is regarding Vane! I never saw such a look upon the colonel's face before. What has that poor fellow been driven to do? I was sure my guardian was ready to forgive him when he went out to-night."

That was a long night of suspense to Nora. Straining her ears, she could hear the colonel's heavy, monotonous tramp up and down his own chamber, and somehow it seemed that her own heart was being crushed under it. What did it forebode to Vane? Something terrible, she was very sure. It was no ordinary wrath, fierce and passing, she had read in her guardian's face; it was an implacable determination, a crushing out suddenly of all the hope and buoyancy which had been reflected there. Once when it seemed she could stand it no longer, she had thrust her little bare feet into slippers, thrown a wrap about her shoulders, and gone shivering through the passage to listen at his door. That changeless tramp, tramp, went up and down, but except that and her own heart-beats, the silence of death reigned throughout the house. She did not dare interrupt him then, and crept back to her room with her own fear intensified. She lay down upon her bed and slept fitfully, the same unformed dread haunting her dreams.

The gray of daylight struggled through the curtains when she awoke. She was unrefreshed, and the chill light of early morning, as she drew back the draperies and glanced out upon the mist and fog, only seemed to make more vivid the specters of the night. The heavy tread had ceased in the colonel's chamber. She hoped he might be asleep at last, and drawing on a dressing-robe, went through the passage to listen at his door again, but all was quiet within. An oriel window was just beyond, and she lingered in it, gazing up at the sky where faint rosy streaks presaged the sunrise, trying vainly to shake off the great dread of evil which had fastened upon her.

The door at her back opened suddenly, and she turned to see Colonel Vivian standing there. He had not undressed during the night. His eyes were dull and heavy, his face altered and worn, until he looked ten years older than when she had seen him last.

"Is that you, Nora?" he asked. "What are you doing there at this hour? Go back to your bed, child, before you take your death of cold."

She sprang to his side, laying both her hands upon his arm, and his gaze shifted from the wistful young face turned up to him as if in pain.

"What is the matter, guardian? Something has happened—what is it? I have hardly slept through knowing how disturbed you were."

"Go back to your room and don't worry, Nora. I have been restless; I am scarcely well; I'll come all right during the day."

"You are looking like a ghost of yourself, guardian. And you can't deceive me. Same thing has happened to your son. What is it, guardian?"

He shook her off almost roughly, and looked at her with strangely anguished eyes.

"Never say that word to me again. I have no son. For all time henceforth I have no son. Never breath

his name to me, never remind me that such a person lives. You are the only child I will ever know again."

"Oh, dear guardian, don't speak so bitterly of him. Your only son—don't judge him too hardly. Think if you are mistaken—if you are doing him injustice?"

"Never speak his name to me again while we both live. He is dead to me as though six feet of earth were on top of him. Better think of him so than as he is."

He drew back and shut the door sharply in her face. Oh, what could have brought this change to him, the generous old man, quick to anger, but always ready to forgive? Her heart sunk like lead. She had never feared his boisterous passions. She feared him now, in this intense, deadly calm.

She did that morning what she had avoided doing for a fortnight past—met Dare alone. Mrs. Grahame was not yet down; she never was down until the fashionable world stirred from its state of ante-meridian stagnancy, and Dare had come unfashionable early, in the vague hope of surprising this meeting.

"I had hardly hoped for such a favor," he said. "Your favors have been few and far between, Miss Carteret; you have amazed me by the magnitude of this one."

I don't want either compliments or sarcasms, Mr. Dare. I want you to tell me what Vane Vivian has been doing since he was here yesterday. You know, if any one does. Have you been instrumental in promoting the cause of disturbance between his father and him?"

"From any one but you the question would be an insult, and you do me injustice to think it, Nora. You should know how faithfully I have endeavored to cover Vane's shortcomings; partly because of our old friendship, partly, of late, I must confess, from a more selfish motive—because I thought you would approve. Even I have not been able to reconcile myself to Vane's course of late."

"You are willing he should be reconciled to it, then? You have not told me what I asked: what has he done? What has imbibited the colonel so against him since he went out last night?"

"Miss Carteret, pardon me! You wish to think well of Vane. Mine shall not be the lips to tell you."

"You mean to convey the worst by that. I ask, I command you, by all the regard you have ever expressed for me, to tell me the truth."

How inexpressibly fair she looked, in his eyes, as she stood there, giving utterance to her command so imperiously! She was plainly attired in a morning-dress of silver gray, with linen bands at her throat and wrists, with the bright hair loosely coiled about the shapely head, and he had never watched her with such furtive, gloating eyes.

"If Miss Carteret commands, her most faithful servant has nothing left but to obey." Something under his servile manner, which seemed to her fine perceptions insulting, something linking himself with her, brought the hot blood tingling to her cheeks, but she was too thoroughly in earnest to swerve from her purpose now. "He has been gambling, but that is no news to you. He has involved himself over head and ears in debt, with not the slightest chance of getting out, now that the colonel has broken with him—broken for good, I very much fear."

"That is not all," said Nora, as he paused. "I knew all that before. Go on, Mr. Dare."

"That is not all, unfortunately. Do you know what a post-obit is, Miss Carteret? I see you do. Well, it appears that Vane has been raising money to clear himself of gambling-debts by a post-obit. The colonel discovered it by chance last night, and he has renounced his son, he swears forever! I really think he means it more earnestly than he ever meant any thing in his life before. It was a cruel cut, after all his leniency to Vane."

"I don't believe it," she said, her clear eyes looking him through, and he bore their scrutiny unflinchingly.

"It is true, nevertheless. Judge for yourself of his desperation when I tell you that he tried to shoot himself after they had met in a gambling-den, where, with his customary recklessness, he had been adding to the burdens he already bore. Tried to shoot himself, and probably would have succeeded but for me. That is one debt of gratitude I may expect to claim from you, Miss Carteret."

"I think if the truth were told it is more than counterbalanced. How did Colonel Vivian come to be in such a place? He is not in the habit of frequenting gambling dens. You took him there, Owen Dare, just as you have managed all the bitter misunderstanding between them, I do believe."

"You are plain-spoken and not charitable, Miss Carteret. The time will come when you will give me greater credit."

"It will if you deserve it, without a doubt."

"You seem to hate me, Nora; and I—I don't merit your hate. I would sacrifice my life, if needful, to your happiness."

"A much less sacrifice will suffice for that, so far as you are concerned—the sacrifice of these attentions which you persist in forcing upon me. You must know how distasteful they are to me."

"No temptation could induce me to give up all hope in that way, Nora. While there is life there is hope, and it must be so with me."

She cut the interview short after that. She was Vane Vivian's friend; she had liked him from the first; once when she had almost persuaded herself she had cause, she had not quite overcome that liking, and now that he was in trouble, when others were turning against him, she was his friend, true and firm. She felt that this man was his enemy, and her own dislike of him multiplied accordingly. However true or false his story might be, he had

made the breach between Colonel Vivian and his son.

"If Sir Rupert were only here," thought Nora, wishfully, "he could discover the truth and do more than any one else."

It was five long days before Sir Rupert's return. Five long days of suspense, during which things visible were scarcely changed. The pleasures of the day and night went on the same. The only change at the up-town mansion was that Vane no longer came there, and his name had been dropped as if with one accord by its inmates. No one seemed to care for his fate, always with one exception—Nora. And even she was forced to respect Colonel Vivian's mandate that the subject should be dropped from discussion.

"Oh, if only Sir Rupert would come, and at last he came."

It was in the midst of crowded reception-rooms that Nora saw him first. He made his way to her side, genial, frank, with no shadow upon him; very clearly knowing nothing of the evil which had come to his friend.

"I want to speak to you of Vane," she whispered, "and I can't here."

"Take my arm. I will find my way out of the crowd," he answered, in the same voice, and in two minutes more they stood alone in a nook of the conservatory, secure from interruption.

"Have you not heard through him?" she asked. "Have you not seen him?"

"I have just returned and came here almost directly. I have heard nothing, seen no one. What is it about Vane? I recall a whisper or two in the crowd, but nothing definite."

"He is in very deep trouble, Sir Rupert. The colonel has cast him off, and everybody else seems to follow his example. The old story of when one is started down the hill."

And then she told him all in substance she had learned regarding that scene in the gaming saloon, repeating her own conviction that Dare was at the bottom of the worst.

"I have not been able to learn what Vane has done since. The colonel has had no communication of any kind with him; he will not even permit his name to be mentioned in his presence. I can't believe Vane bad as he is represented, whether he has been guilty of all these things or not. He has been driven to them; he has a good heart, I am sure. You are his friend, Sir Rupert, and I know that you will not desert him."

"I never will," declared Sir Rupert, warmly. "You are right in your estimation of him, Miss Carteret. He is a noble fellow, whatever his faults or his follies may have been."

"I don't know if there is any way in which he can be saved from his creditors. Mrs. Grahame said once that he could be imprisoned for obtaining money on false pretenses, and I don't know what other harm may threaten him; the worst perhaps from himself. Oh, Sir Rupert! how hopeless he must have been to attempt his own life."

She shuddered, and he observed how pale the pure, sensitive face had grown. Could Vane have seen her there, pleading his cause with the one man she knew to be true to him, all her best sympathies enlisted for him in the dark path he was traversing, who can tell how much of the still darker future might have been spared?

Sir Rupert, looking down upon her, thought that womanly faith had never taken a more beautiful form.

"If he is not yet saved and prove to you that he is worthy of your trust, it will be because no earthly power will avail," he said earnestly. "Don't fear but he shall be saved, Miss Carteret."

CHAPTER XV.

WHO PAID THE DEBTS.

THESE five days had been days of intolerable agony to Vane Vivian. He had remained close to his own apartments, denying himself even to Dare, waiting the result he felt must come soon: the action of his creditors. Waiting in sullen desperation rather than attempt to fly from them, as any other man might have done.

It was very nearly midnight, and he was still sitting before his fire, moody, despairing, when a knock sounded at his door, and a servant appeared at his answer.

"A gentleman to see you, sir, if you have not tired. Very important, or I wouldn't have disturbed you, sir."

"Haven't I said that I would see no one? Tell the person so."

"You will see me, Vivian." The gentleman had followed close in the servant's wake, and stepped forward to speak for himself. "It is late; but you will pardon that in the anxiety which would not let me wait."

"Sir Rupert! I do not need to say how welcome you are. I thought it was one of those cursed meddlers who are always ready to intrude and gloat over a man's misery when he's in the last ditch. This is kind of you. Of course you know?"

"Yes, I know, Vane. I heard the story of your misfortunes scarcely an hour ago."

"Misfortunes? You are very lenient. The results of my recklessness deserve a far harsher name. At twenty-three I am a ruined and hopeless man through my own folly. A cheerful prospect before me knowing that, is it not? I wonder what the end to such a career is apt to be?"

"My dear fellow, you are discouraged now. Be sure there is some way out of your difficulties. It is to help you find it that I have come here to-night. Will you tell me just how you stand, keeping nothing back?"

"For what good, Sir Rupert? Whether it is a thousand or a hundred thousand, it is all the same to

me. I haven't the hope of raising a penny. Do you know, I might be turned out of my lodgings here but that I chanced to pay the quarter in advance?"

"Not so bad but it might be worse, I dare say. Let me tell you what I have heard, and you can signify how much of it is true. In the first case, is it a fact that you have been raising money on a post-obit?"

Vane buried his face in his hands with a groan.

"My dear fellow, I am not here to blame you," said Sir Rupert, gently. "Don't you suppose I understand that you were driven to it?"

Vane lifted his haggard face and looked forward into the coals, a quiver which he could not suppress for a moment about his lips.

"I don't deserve such friendship as yours. It's all true. I was involved, and getting deeper every day, and those night-brokers were the first to propose it to me. I was the heir to Thornhurst; why not clear myself of embarrassments through my future prospects? They knew their business, and put it that way. Let them advance me fifty thousand now, and the return should be eighty thousand when I came into my inheritance, with so much percentage to increase with the ratio of years. I have shuddered with horror since, to think how I set up money by the side of my father's life, but I did not think of it so then. I paid my debts with that money, and squandered the little which was left along with my regular allowance, and became involved for twenty thousand more, in the vain hope that luck might turn. I knew what I might expect when my father declared he would disinherit me. I have signed myself in a Shylock bond, and I look for no mercy. I don't know what the worst may be, but that is what I have to expect. My only wonder is, they have delayed this long. If it was to torture me, they couldn't have chosen a better method than by keeping me in this suspense."

"Not so bad as it might be, as I told you, Vane. The brokers will be glad to get out of their bond, since they understand that you have lost your chance of Thornhurst. There is nothing there to dishearten you, my dear boy—certainly nothing criminal."

"Nothing! I have just told you, Sir Rupert, that I am in debt seventy thousand dollars, and I doubt if I could raise seventy thousand cents to save my own neck."

"I quite understand you; but it is not out of the question that some compromise may be made. It must be that your creditors are waiting for, and I would be ashamed to be ranked as your friend, Vane, if I were not ready now to act a friend's part."

He spoke hurriedly, a little constrainedly. The other looked at him, then put forward a hand to grasp him in a tight pressure.

"Heaven bless you, Sir Rupert Archer. But that must not be. No, I will not hear another word. I have brought myself to grief, but my best friend shall not suffer through me."

Sir Rupert saw how useless it would be to urge him.

"You will not refuse to let me investigate for you, then, Vivian? To see what kind of a compromise may be effected, and what hindrance is apt to be put in your way if you are obliged to go away from here? Have you thought of going away?"

"I suppose there will be nothing else left," Vane said, wearily. "I did not even count on that alternative. I had made up my mind to take the consequence of my own acts, without even an attempt to evade it."

"You have been reckless even in your desperation. Have you tried to effect a reconciliation with your father?"

"It would be worse than useless. He has the best of reasons for holding bitter anger—he will never forgive me while he lives. It is my just retribution—that and all else which may come to me. I have not a friend left I can count upon unless it is you, Sir Rupert. And Dare—I should not forget Dare—he has been faithful as a brother."

Sir Rupert had his own doubts of Dare, but such vague and apparently unfounded doubts he would not hint them.

"You have one more very warm friend—one whose friendship any man might be proud to claim. I speak of Miss Carteret. It was she who told me the news first, and urged me to come to you without delay."

"Yes," said Vane, bitterly; "she may well urge it now, that her own aim is secure of accomplishment. Did you know the colonel declared in favor of her against my own chance of inheritance? You know the full measure of my wickedness now, but perhaps you do not know what brought the first decided outbreak between my father and myself. She crept into my place in his heart until he proposed to marry her to me as my only chance of succeeding to Thornhurst, and when I refused, he declared that she should inherit instead. After that came the exposure of my own baseness. I shudder at the thought of the unfilial monster my father must consider me."

"You do Miss Carteret wrong, Vane. She has tried to reconcile your father to you, and my own realization of the depth of his anger comes through the knowledge that she failed. If you had seen her as I did this very night, with tears in her eyes as she spoke of your despair, you would not doubt her sincerity. Miss Carteret is honest in her likes and dislikes; you are one of the fortunate few for whom she professes friendship, and she loses no opportunity to speak in your favor."

"I hope I may have done her injustice. I was bitterly disappointed in her, Sir Rupert. But no more of this. Dare tells me—I have seen him but once—that the festivities will begin at Thornhurst a little sooner because of my disgrace. The family goes down by the middle of the month, a week from this

and such guests as may not be able to tear themselves away from the gayeties here follow after the twentieth. I hope you will not forget your engagement there; Mrs. Grahame would be inconsolable."

"We will consider that again, but it is very possible Thornhurst may not now see me among the number. If I am to serve you, Vane, you must tell me where I can find these creditors of yours."

"I will go with you when you like. I am not afraid to face them; that will be enough better than this state of prolonged suspense."

"No, my dear boy! A matter like this is better settled through a third person. Convince them that no possible good can come through molesting you—that their only hope of obtaining anything is in giving you a chance, and letting you off quietly. I can give you letters to influential men in London, if you wish to try it there, but of that we will also speak again. I will not detain you longer than to give me the address. I am not very fresh myself after my journey of this afternoon."

He took down the direction Vane gave him carefully, and when he left, a few minutes later, there was more hope in the other's heart than had been there for days. His sleep that night was visited by pleasant dreams—dreams of a future which would redeem the past, and the angel who guarded the bright opening path wore the face of Nora.

Sir Rupert Archer lost no time in pursuing his investigations. The result was one furthest from his anticipations. He was back at his friend's lodgings by noon of the following day. Vane met him with all the dread he had nearly dismissed rushing upon him.

"What delusion is this you are laboring under, my dear fellow?" cried Sir Rupert gayly, giving him such a grip as one would scarcely expect from his soft white hand. "You owe no man anything. I have been to see your Shylock and he declares his bond paid to the utmost."

Vane started back.

"Archer! you have not—"

"I have not indeed, Vivian. Look into my eyes and be assured that, like your famous countryman, I cannot tell a lie. It is true, and I am almost as joyfully excited as you possibly can be."

"I can scarcely believe it is not a mistake. Who that would, could pay my debts to such an amount?"

"There is the mystery, Vane. The broker declined to tell me. He declared that he had been satisfied in full and had given up the bond; that his friend, whom I did not see—some disturbance has sent him out of the city from what I learned—the one who had a claim for twenty thousand had also been fully paid. All the information that he would give was that the party concerned had communicated with him through an agent, and had desired to remain incognito. Do you see no hope in this, Vane?"

A glow came into Vane's face, an eager light into his eyes.

"It must have been my father—it could have been no one else. It is more than I deserved, more than I ever hoped for."

His voice broke and his eyes suffused. He turned away abruptly to hide his emotion.

"I am going to call at the house after I return to my rooms and make a more suitable appearance. Shall I take some message from you, or—or will you go yourself and seek the reconciliation which may not be impossible now. I think with you, no one but your father could have done this."

"Neither, my friend. My father has relented in this to save our name, and to spare me; but he may be bitterly angered still. I will wait some token from him before I intrude myself upon his notice, even by a word."

Nora heard the news from the baronet's lips, some two hours later.

"It is very strange," she said, thoughtfully. "I am positive it could not have been the colonel. He has not displayed one sign of relenting toward Vane."

"It must be, then, that his pride has induced him to spare his son the consequences of these debts."

"Possibly, but I cannot think so." And, though Nora said nothing more, she decided in her own mind that the baronet himself was responsible for the generous act.

The next week went swiftly by. The colonel and Nora with Mrs. Grahame and their guests departed for Thornhurst. A few lingering later followed about the twentieth, and of the whole invited number Sir Rupert Archer was the very last to leave the city.

Meantime Vane was making preparations to quit the country. He had fallen in with his friend's suggestion and determined to proceed first to London. His preparations were all but complete now, but he was lingering with no definite time for his departure set.

"I feel that if I go without my father's blessing, I will never have it," he said to Sir Rupert. "I shall take my passage for the third and wait until the last moment for some token. Go on to Thornhurst, my friend, and, if you can, send me a little hope from there. At any rate, I shall see you again before I leave."

So Sir Rupert walked across from the station and into Thornhurst mansion, the despaired-of celebrity, on Christmas eve.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COVETED INVITATION.

At no time for twenty years had Thornhurst been so gay. Mrs. Grahame had *carte blanche* in ruling the entertainment, and Mrs. Grahame had apparently determined that no home-party in Christendom should excel this one in brilliancy, and in crowding one amusement after another like kaleidoscopic changes. Her whole life was bound up in surface

pleasure. She had breathed the atmosphere of gaiety in her New York home, but for all that there was a skeleton in the closet there, whose dry bones rattled very often in her ears with disagreeable import. Lack of ready money was the great want of her life. Without it she had held her own with the world, she was a leader in society, but she was obliged to force recognition now where she would have overpowered with sufficient means at her disposal. There was a Mr. Grahame, also, but he was seldom seen, and when he was seen, the meek little man, whose only aim seemed to be to avoid all observation, escaped with the smallest modicum of attention. A dingy, dark counting-room down-town knew far more of him than his wife's parlors. But for all that the parlors were apt to grow a trifle shabby between the times of their refitting; the silver-plate was old-fashioned, and Mrs. Grahame's oilets were neither so magnificent nor so varied as she would have liked to make them. But Mrs. Grahame made the best of all these things with that tact which wins success without apparent effort.

But there was a change. Here was all the glitter and the froth presented to her with none of the care to imbitter the draught beneath. So she went to work with a will to make Thornhurst the center of attractions scarcely less than those they had lately left.

"I have only one obstacle yet to overcome, but I almost despair of that," she said to Nora on the day preceding that which should usher in Christmas eve. "I want a Cleopatra for the *tableaux vivants*; I have set my heart on that being the most gorgeous scene of all. And not one of all the people here can represent Egypt's dusky queen. You will be admirable as Titania, Nora, a trifle tall, but the ladies here are all tall, as it chances, and all blondes. It was the greatest of oversights that I didn't secure one decided brunette. I have been looking for one among the families of the neighborhood, but the darkest among all the ladies who have called is blue-eyed and brown-haired, as far from my Cleopatra as day is from night."

"Then you haven't had a sight of Miss Montrose. The very ideal of a Cleopatra, Mrs. Grahame, positively the most beautiful woman I ever saw in my life. It is very unfortunate that the colonel's prejudices are so strong. He has a bitter dislike of her father, and I am afraid that even for you Miss Montrose will not be admitted to Thornhurst. He refused me, and I am hardly over the disappointment yet. I absolutely fell in love with her at first sight, and notwithstanding all the delightfully trying experiences I have been through since, that first impression lingers still."

"Fell in love, Nora! What a strong expression applied to an ordinary person like that Miss Montrose. I am sure we all have reason for thankfulness that your guardian is so decided. A very common young woman, Mrs. Grahame, I assure you, something of an Amazon in appearance, I grant, but not at all the sort of person you would care to introduce to such society as you have gathered here. I am positive my nerves would not bear the strain of her presence."

Mrs. Sholto Hayes who was present roused herself from her habitual languor to express herself thus forcibly.

"She's the picture of a Southern beauty, Mrs. Grahame, and as much a lady as I am," asserted Nora, in laughing defiance. "Mrs. Hayes saw things through the reverse of the glass that day; one of those days when everything goes wrong, and I was the unfortunate cause in her case. Mrs. Hayes suffered through her discomfiture at being precipitated in the lane and afterward taking refuge in a house where she hadn't gone through with the formality previously of leaving her card."

The exertion of resistance from Mrs. Hayes was out of the question. She sunk back among the cushions of a couch where she had reclined all the morning.

"You queer creature!" she said, in mild protest. "One never knows how to take you."

"Montrose," repeated Mrs. Grahame, "and Southerners, did you say, Nora? It must be the family of whom Mr. Telford from the village was speaking yesterday. He said a portion of the lands that were confiscated during the war had been restored to Mr. Montrose. I remember he remarked they had remained very secluded here, and my own impression was rather favorable than otherwise. I don't see that this Miss Montrose should be less eligible as a guest than any other young lady of the neighborhood. We positively must have her if she will answer for a Cleopatra."

"You forget the one difficulty, my guardian's objection. He is scarcely more likely to consent now than before."

"Uncle Seymour has given the invitations entirely in my charge. I shall invite Miss Montrose in my own name. You may mention it to the colonel if you like, but in any case the young lady must be secured. But I really don't see how with all the customs to be inspected, I am to take time to call upon her this morning. Do you suppose that you could manage it, Nora? You would answer quite as well."

"I shall be too happy with my guardian's consent. But for once I decline to 'beard the lion in his den, the Vivian in his halls.' You must take that responsibility, Mrs. Grahame."

"Here he comes for the very purpose of cutting the knot of our difficulties," and Mrs. Grahame glanced up sweetly. "I have just discovered a person to take the important character of the evening, uncle Seymour—the Cleopatra, you know, which I had almost despaired of representing. You will have no objection to sending an invitation even at this late day, I hope?"

"I leave everything of that kind with you, Lisa."

How your life complete by all means?" said Vivian had entered with something of a feverish earnestness into these festive preparations. He was striving to bury his own deep disappointment in the excitement of the time.

"Thanks, my dear uncle. Of course I did not really suppose you would object, but Nora here appeared to have some misgivings."

"The lady is Miss Montrose," spoke up Nora. "You know, Colonel Vivian, whether I had cause for misgiving or not. I for one would dearly like to have her here."

"I understand that the circumstances of the family heretofore have not been quite unexceptionable," put in Mrs. Grahame silkily. "That objection is alleviated by the restoration of Southern property very recently effected. The father and daughter intend to depart for the South early in the new year, Mr. Telford mentioned."

Over the colonel's face swept a shade, his shaggy, white brows lowered, and Nora watching felt that Miss Montrose's chances were few for appearing at Thornhurst. It was a moment before he spoke, and during that moment there had been a struggle in the colonel's mind.

His hatred of Walter Montrose had been based on his discovery that the other aspired to an alliance between his own daughter and the colonel's son. Walter Montrose had come to him, six years before, and made the proposal openly, insolently the colonel had considered it, urging his own birth and breeding, his daughter's beauty and culture, the far-off possibility of an honorable title and emoluments descending to him. Colonel Vivian rejected the proposition with scorn. No impostor, runaway slave-owner of the South, secessionist at heart, should become allied in the remotest degree with the loyal, hot-headed Vivians. There might be other men as well-bred and as well-born too, he would dare say, other young ladies quite as beautiful and cultured, and for his own part he would rather see Vane married to some pretty, graceful girl of his own position, and no pedigree than any offshoot of Old England snobbishness. Of the far-away title and expectations he was suspicious, not to say openly incredulous. Things were vastly altered since that, however. There was no heir of Thornhurst now to be angled for. His own dislike for the man Montrose need not be brought into play, since they were to leave the neighborhood at so near a date. Yes, the girl might come if she chose and the others really wished.

He said so, not any too graciously, it is to be feared, and stalked away on his dignity to an uncompromising degree, but under that stiff demeanor was the harrowing conviction always present of the bitter wound his own pride and independence had received.

Never, never again would Colonel Vivian be the same free-hearted, passionate, yet noble old man he had been before.

"Are you aware how close it is upon Christmas time, Venetia?"

"The twenty-third, papa. I had occasion to consult the calendar this morning."

"After the style of Robinson Crusoe with his notched stick, that is all you have to mark the days. Are you any nearer an invitation to Thornhurst than you were two weeks ago, when the party first returned?"

"Certainly not. I was not aware that you still aspired to that honor for me."

"I have never retracted my first expression of the wish. Why should you think it?"

Miss Montrose lifted her face from the work with which she was engaged to look steadily at her father.

"I was aware of your plans in the past, the only plans which could interest you in my gaining entrance at Thornhurst. You know I never approved of them, even when I yielded in a measure to your wishes. Now that Colonel Vivian has disinherited his son, what possible object can you have in still desiring me to make friends with one who has certainly shown himself no friend of yours?"

"I gave you credit for some degree of discretion, Venetia. The colonel may disinherit his son a half-dozen times and come out the more deeply attached to him in the end. These floating rumors may be true or false, and no better place for discovering which than at the mansion. In any event an opening for you there at the present time will be equivalent to an opening into the world when you are ready for it. Make friends of the people there, and you will have friends when we come North for next summer's campaign. You know what these people who have been gossiping about our recent good fortune do not, that no great boon has been bestowed in granting back those worn-out plantation grounds and racked buildings. The little that made the place attractive once is gone now. We go there simply because there is nothing to be gained just now by staying here, and because a winter at the South will have its weight with those who have known us so meagerly circumstanced here. They will hardly suppose it a no more enticing prospect luring us away. Next season, as I said, we will come North again, and whether or not Thornhurst is yet an aim, and Vane Vivian the man I would choose for you, I shall expect you to do credit to your training."

She had not removed her eyes from his face all the while he had been speaking. Dark, passionate eyes they were, for all her features were disciplined to almost equal composure with his own. Her fingers had locked together in her lap with a pressure which left the blood settled in purple blotches under the almond-shaped nails.

"You have been training me all my life to barter my womanhood for the basest and paltriest considerations earth holds. You are urging me now to make a display of whatever good looks I have."

bestowed upon me for no other purpose than the sake of such profit as you hope to make through me. You would show me as you would a horse or any other piece of property; you would make the best of my fine points and sell me to the highest bidder. Oh, papa! can nothing tempt you to more mercy than that? Do I deserve nothing better from you?"

"You have taken up strange views of these matters, Venetia—views that, with your education, I am disappointed at finding you entertain. You speak scornfully of the 'basest and paltriest considerations,' as though all your life you had not been ground down for lack of them. You are modest on the subject of what you are pleased to term your good looks as well. In that one way you have been dowered munificently. If favor of station went in accordance with natural charms, you would surely be a queen. I have certainly counted upon making that beauty of yours a capital, Venetia. I have spared neither expense nor pains, as you know. I stood at no sacrifice in securing you the best instruction, in fitting you to appear equal with the best. In return I expect what I have striven to faithfully give—duty. Sacrifice to secure your own best interests and mine, if you consider it sacrifice; certainly no faltering on your part from this time out. Let me request that you do not make it necessary for me to repeat this homily again. I detest long speeches, and you have a full understanding of my expectations on this point."

Those cold, thin features and steely eyes were never harder than then, and in Venetia's mind again rose the question which had haunted her for weeks past—did he know that she was already a wife? She had thought so on that October night which seemed ages ago; she had gone to the tryst for a few brief moments on the following night; she had told Dare of her fears and begged him to come no more. It was like crushing all hope for herself, but she dared not risk that merciless displeasure to be wreaked upon Owen Dare. He had obeyed her so implicitly that, from that night, she had not once seen nor heard from him. He was at Thornhurst with the Christmas party, she knew, but so far as she was concerned, Thornhurst might have been at the antipodes, for her own knowledge of what was transpiring there.

She turned her head and looked through the window away across snowy stretches of field and lane, through leafless trees and bare shrubbery, where the walls of Thornhurst mansion rose stately and burnished to a red gleam in the winter sunlight. A noble pile, and one that Walter Montrose might almost be excused for coveting.

"Next to having the station which may come to me yet, my pride would be in seeing you mistress of a place like that," he said, observing where her glance wandered. "I don't suppose you are really to blame for failing to find a place there among the guests. I am only disappointed that your woman's ingenuity should not contrive some avenue of approach."

"Something more than mere ingenuity was required," she answered, listlessly. "I might have forced my way into the house, I dare say; I might even have staid there as lady's-maid, or seamstress, or something of that kind, now that I presume they are engaged with the costumes and preparations for the next few weeks, but I am not likely to be benefited by the change. We are as far from them to all practical purposes as the earth is from the stars."

"By no means, Venetia. If the case were hopeless—ah!" as his eyes were arrested by a shadow crossing the path without, a shape coming in through the rustic gate in front. "Who knows but your chance is really at hand at last, my dear? That is surely Colonel Vivian's ward."

Colonel Vivian's ward was admitted two minutes later, bright and fresh from her brisk walk through the keen wintry air. She took the seat which was offered her, dropped her fur-lined wrap back from her shoulders, and chatted on the indifferent talk which are always brought in on such occasions.

"I am delighted that an opportunity has occurred for renewing our acquaintance, Miss Montrose," said Nora, "even at the risk of having you think I might have found the opportunity sooner. My call of to-day should properly have devolved upon our mistress of ceremonies, but I usurped the favor instead. I am authorized to convey Mrs. Grahame's compliments and all that, but I am going to beg for my own sake that you will not refuse what I have come to ask. It is that you will come up to Thornhurst, be my particular guest for the next week."

Thus the invitation had come at last. Mr. Montrose, apparently absorbed in his book on the further side of the room from the first moment after Nora's entrance, shot a quick glance toward his daughter.

"I had not expected such an honor," said Miss Montrose, calmly.

"I do hope you will consent, although—" and Nora laughed—"I have not spoken of the weighty consequences to ensue. We are all engaged for acting charades, tableaux and the like, and at a glowing description from me, Mrs. Grahame has set her heart on securing you to take a part in them. She wants a Cleopatra, and of all the people far and near you are the only one who could consistently take the part."

"To which fact I am indebted for my invitation. Many thanks, Miss Carteret—"

"Now you are not going to refuse?" cried Nora, in alarm. "Indeed I have wanted you sincerely from the time we first came down."

"I am too sensible of the honor to think of refusing. I shall be happy to prove of any service, Miss Carteret, and accept most gladly."

Nora took her departure soon after, promising to send a carriage for Miss Montrose, and such effects as she should need for a week's sojourn, later in the

day. Venetia watched her from the window, taking a path across the fields on her return. What she had longed for she had in this invitation to Thornhurst. She would have the opportunity of meeting Owen Dare without fear, and beyond that she would not let her thoughts stray. She would meet Owen Dare, but for her life she could not have defined the thrill at her heart as most glad or painful.

CHAPTER XVII.

PARTED.

SIR RUPERT ARCHER, valise in hand, walked across from the village station and into Thornhurst as the tongues of flame sprung up from the chandeliers and from the wax-tapers which studded the festoons decorating the walls, upon Christmas eve.

The colonel met him in the hall most cordially.

"We had quite given you up," he said, with a hearty handshake. "The ladies have been making a doleful moan at losing you, as they suppose. That's what it is to be young and a favorite. But, how does this come? Did you miss the carriage? I sent it to meet the express on the mere chance of any late comer."

"I saw nothing of it, and am almost glad it was so. A mile's walk on a clear frosty evening over a good road with the expectation of Christmas cheer ahead is the best of appetizers, and I have been observing the admirable situation of your grounds as I came along. Thornhurst is a fine place, an exceedingly fine place, of which our Sussex lords and squires might be proud.

"You invest it with too much merit, Sir Rupert. Great as my own affection for Thornhurst may be I am aware it will bear no comparison with your wide-spreading English domains. You will wish to go to your room at once, I presume. The dressing-bell rung full ten minutes ago, but dinner can be delayed a trifle for your accommodation. Here, Benson," beckoning a servant appearing at the rear, "show Sir Rupert Archer to the room reserved for him, the front chamber, north. My niece would not admit any other occupant, even after she had given up all hope of you."

Dinner was not required to wait for the baronet. Never a fop, his plain dress was soon arranged, and he was the first to descend the stairs while the loud-mouthed second bell yet vibrated from roof to basement. He walked up and down the lighted hall, half a smile on his grave mouth, and a trifle more eagerness in the candid blue eyes than was customary to this retiring specimen of English nobility. There was not a doubt in a moment more of whose influence had called into being both smile and eager light.

There was a faint rustle above, a cloud of shimmering azure silk on the stairway, and Nora floated down, humming a morsel from *Fra Diavolo* as she came, which changed to an exclamation of surprise and welcome at sight of him.

"You, Sir Rupert? Is it possible? The very last gentleman of my acquaintance I should have expected to prove a laggard. I always gave you credit for possessing the virtue of punctuality."

"It is something to be invested with any virtue, in Miss Carteret's eyes. I must be sorry to lose even the smallest."

He held her hand one second longer than was necessary as he spoke, as she flashed a glance up at him, standing tall and broad under the hall lights. Compliments were rare from the baronet.

"You are the only man who does not talk nonsense to me, Sir Rupert. Pray, don't lose your claim to my gratitude by adopting the execrable habit, at this late day."

He was not the least in the world in love with her, but he found a pleasure in watching the pearly face which he had surprised himself by being impatient to see as he neared Thornhurst. Not the least in love with her, but at that moment it would not have been hard to have induced Sir Rupert Archer to believe it not the most impossible consummation in the world.

"You have come from Vane?" she asked, a quick change in her tone. "Is he there still?"

"He is there still, but has taken passage in the steamer for the third. He will come down to Thornhurst first if there is the slightest chance of winning Colonel Vivian's pardon."

"My guardian, so generous on every other point, is hard as a rock where Vane is concerned. I do believe he would not relent to save him from life-long exile."

Just then another premonitory rustle was heard, and Mrs. Grahame appeared upon the stairway, and after her came the train of Christmas guests. Sir Rupert was welcomed again, and reproached for tardiness, and the whole party went in to dinner, for as Young defines the one grand sympathy of mankind:

"Their various cares in one great point combine, The business of their lives—that is, to dine."

"So sorry you are not down in time to take an active part in our entertainments for the evening," said Mrs. Grahame to the baronet, who was installed in the place of honor at her right. "With your talent engaged I would have no fear of success. You Englishmen as a rule are so self-contained you should prove the *ne plus ultra* of actors. With the list of performers as it is I am almost confident."

"Mrs. Grahame has pressed us all into service," spoke Nora, opposite. "Such a well-drilled lot of amateurs as we have been this past week should reflect some of the credit due such an indefatigable chief."

"It is most fortunate I was not here to be classed among the number," answered Sir Rupert. "My talent lies anywhere but in amateur acting."

"Owen Dare is superb," put in Mrs. Grahame, animatedly. "Such a modest young man—I never inspected him of actual genius before. I am more

than ever convinced that Dare is bound to make his mark in the world yet."

Sir Rupert's eyes lifted to meet the defiant flash in the brown ones opposite. Was it *rapport* between the two that made his lips compress, and a swift gloom sweep over his face? Whether Dare had or had not been instrumental in bringing the misfortunes which harassed Vane Vivian, he was pre-judged in the minds of these two.

"By-the-by," remarked the baronet, with a glance down the table, "I supposed Mr. Dare was here. I discover my mistake for the first time."

"He has been stopping in the village for the last two days, attending to some of the colonel's complicated business affairs. I protested, for I lost my right-hand aid with Dare gone, but even his general spirit of accommodation failed me. My uncle has discovered his merits and taken him into confidence; he has engaged him formally as secretary and agent, though I think it a mistake to confine him to so mean a position. I expected him here before this. Started on her pet theme Mrs. Grahame talked on, and the dinner passed rather draggily for anticipation of the brilliant evening."

Quite a large company had been invited. A range of connecting rooms were thrown into one, draperies were artistically arranged and a temporary stage constructed in the furthest apartment.

Much care and study had been devoted to all the arrangements, and Mrs. Grahame herself could not have desired a greater success than the experiment proved as the evening wore on. She had the advantage on her side of a friendly audience, no carping critics, no *blase* lookers on to throw the chill of indifference instead of appreciation. Dare returned in time to draw honor upon himself. As Lara, bold and brave, as unfortunate Earl Hastings, the fair-haired cavalier, as reckless Rob Roy, in tartan-plaid, as the model Italian brigand, with appliances of burnt cork and slouched sombrero and short cloak flung carelessly over his shoulders, displaying a deadly-looking rapier dangling from a jeweled belt—in each and all of these various characters he represented, Dare bore off the palm.

Sir Rupert Archer sat in the audience, looking on in quiet approval, but it was noticeable to Mrs. Grahame's watchful eyes that his attention was most engaged, his pleasure most apparent, with each repetition of Nora's appearance in the mimic display.

"There isn't a doubt but she may be 'my lady' yet if she chooses," thought the lynx-eyed matron.

"Of course she'll choose; a girl would be a fool to throw away such a chance, and she makes no secret of her liking. I'm sorry for Dare, but, sensible as he is, he must have given up hope before this. He couldn't expect her to hesitate between himself and nothing, and a baronet worth ten thousand pounds a year. It will be something to have been chaperoned to a 'my lady'!"

It was an idea the more pleasing for its novelty to the American dame. She was weighing them all in her own worldly balance, and carefully excluding the feather which might turn the scale. Other chaperones have been quite as sanguine as was Mrs. Grahame that night, with no more encouragement than she seemed to possess.

The curtain went up on an elaborate scene—a representation from the "Midsummer Night's Dream," in which all the previous performers were grouped, in the center Titania, the fairy queen. Nora in silver tissue with glittering spangles, her bright hair unbound and garlanded with flowers, fair above all the fair faces grouped about, an ethereal vision on which Sir Rupert's contemplative eyes lingered, and he drew an audible breath as the curtain went down.

"Loveliest creature of the lot—the Carteret, you know. Prettiest little thing that ever made havoc with any poor susceptible devil—by Jove! no wonder half the fellows here are wild about her. Cool, the way Dare bluffs them all. I'd go in and cut him out myself with half a show for it."

Mr. Telford speaking at his elbow brought Sir Rupert's thoughts to earth again. He had been in the clouds for a single moment, and they were hazy ideas which had floated in his mind. Was he losing his heart to this fair little republican, after all? He had never liked any one quite so well before, and Archer Hall would seem sadly dull and dispiriting in its empty grandeur when he should go back to the Sussex Parks and the quiet life of a country gentleman there. A presence like Nora's would make it another place. Almost in Sir Rupert's mind a new resolution was brought to life—almost. But Telford's voice broke the spell, and the baronet threaded his bronze-bright beard with those soft white fingers where the ruby ring, blazoned with the crest of the Archers, glowed like fire, and made answer with his usual complacency.

"Miss Carteret is lovely, as you say. She is very much admired, deservedly so. Is that the end of our entertainment, do you chance to know?"

Mr. Telford was not positive, and sauntered across to consult one of the fair amateurs who appeared in the audience. Titania followed in another moment, in her silver gauze and spangles still, and came directly to Sir Rupert's side.

"Just one more of these tiresome spectacles," she said. "I have been wondering if we all looked as much like senseless puppets as we felt, up there—as I felt, rather. I will not take the responsibility to answer for all the rest. I was never born to be an actress. This is something different, however, this last tableau—with a promise sufficient to draw me front for a view."

"It can scarcely excel all that has gone before," said Sir Rupert, gallantly.

"Perhaps you think as Mr. Telford does. I heard him remark to Miss Gray as I passed—with the light of your countenance removed the rest must be very commonplace indeed. Mr. Telford is in love.

poor young man, and should hardly come under the law which is a power to save people. Is it possible that you, too, Sir Rupert, can be looking through his style of glasses?"

"Certainly not, Miss Carteret. I believe I can conscientiously say I have never been in love in my life."

"Never been in love! And you expect any lady of this nineteenth century to fully credit that? I thought falling in love was one of the ill's mortality is heir to, after the fashion of children cutting teeth and coming through the measles. You should set up for the eighth wonder of the world, Sir Rupert—*young, rich, a baronet, and never in love!*"

The bell tinkled, the curtain began slowly to rise, but Sir Rupert bent his head to say:

"Let me amend my words, then. I was never in love before—"

Unconsciously his eyes were fixed upon the stage, and he broke off his speech, for there in all her magnificence was the glowing Eastern queen, the Cleopatra whom Shakespeare has depicted with the magic which immortalized him—a bewildering picture of such rare, dark beauty as he had dreamed of but never seen.

The curtain went down on a murmur of applause, the music swelled, and the audience broke from their seats, noisily discussing this last scene before all the other performances of the evening. Sir Rupert had quite forgotten his incomplete sentence, but Nora's eyes had not failed to take in something of his absorbed expression along with the brief scene.

"Who was that lady?" he asked. "Certainly no one I have seen before. She was not among the guests at dinner, I am positive."

"She is my especial guest, Miss Montrose, of the neighborhood here. She was not at dinner because she insisted upon gratifying some of Mrs. Grahame's extreme whims in regard to the costumes. Things which were perfect before were found sadly amiss at the last minute, and Miss Montrose has excellent taste. She will be here in a moment, and you shall have an introduction, Sir Rupert."

One other had been quite as strongly impressed by the vivid Cleopatra as the wealthy baronet. It was Dare, unsuspecting until this moment of Venetia's presence there. With difficulty he had repressed a start, had stood calmly watching until the curtain fell again, and then stepped into a window-recess where the draperies concealed him. Masks seldom fall from skilled faces even when alone, and Owen Dare's did not change except perhaps in hardening a shade, but there was fierce anger in his heart, a full realization for the first time of how that hasty act of two years ago might rise up now to baffle his present schemes.

"For all that, I will never be baffled," he thought, drawing his breath hard through set teeth. "She has come here where she could not help knowing I would least wish her to come, that too after her own professed reason for desiring it has ceased to exist. Blast these women's perverse heads! The one I tired of long ago will follow me up, and the one I want hates me like death. Well, we shall see who wins in the end, but I would rather bet on one man's wit than fifty women's obstinacy. There's always some way to lead them, thank fortune!"

Nora brought about the introduction she had promised the baronet. Sir Rupert Archer and Miss Montrose stood face to face for a moment, then he offered his arm and they sauntered away across the room, some envious eyes following them, a few admiring ones noting their tall, well-matched forms and different styles.

The rooms had been rapidly cleared, and where the stage had been a few couples now were circling to the measure of a Strauss' waltz, while nearer were card-tables and a couple of quiet persons settled over a backgammon board. He found her a seat and remained by her side while other guests danced or played or promenaded about them.

"Your name is quite a familiar one to my ears," said Sir Rupert, stooping to restore her fan which she had dropped. "Montrose is the family name of my lord of Cleveland, whose estates join my own."

"I hope for the sake of the name they prove themselves agreeable neighbors, at the risk of reflecting upon so great a personage as a 'my lord,' by supposing he could be anything but agreeable."

"Not wholly an incorrect supposition. The old Earl of Cleveland was noted in his day for being the most reckless and profligate peer in the realm. He retired at last to his country house because it was all that was left to him, and of late years has been making spasmodic efforts at economy which is absolute miserliness. He might even succeed in bringing up his fallen fortunes, but that the young lord is following very close in his own tracks. He only saved himself by making a wealthy marriage, a few months before I came over. I never saw much of them, being very little at home since their forced isolation. But of course you are in no way interested in a description of these people, so totally strange to you."

"Like most Americans, I am interested in the doings of the nobility. You would smile, but for your own probable experience of the reality, at the halo a title casts about its wearer here."

"At least for nobility of mind and heart your countrymen cannot be excelled. For open-hearted generosity the Southerners have borne a world-wide reputation. I chance to have heard that you are from the South, Miss Montrose."

Talking for the most part of indifferent things he found himself under the influence of a spell—a spell cast by two great, soft, luminous dark eyes, by rippling, lustrous, midnight hair, by a Juno-like form and that inborn grace which never fails to mark the perfect lady. Young, handsome, wealthy, a baronet, and never in love before, Sir Rupert Archer had yielded an unresisting victim to the tender passion at first sight. Could any one have told him

then that a man of Dare's caliber had won and wearied of this glorious creature, it would have been like pressing an impossibility upon his mind.

"Do see that Miss Montrose monopolize the baronet," said Miss Gray to her follower back in the thicker circle of guests. "I wonder if he admires that gipsy style. I can't compliment his taste if he does." Miss Gray herself was a snow-flake blonde.

Mr. Telford twirled his mustache and glanced that way not unadmiringly himself.

"The baronet seems well enough contented to be monopolized, and I thought he was getting quite a spoon about that pretty Miss Carteret. Came near taxing him with it, 'pon honor! Would have, but these English swells are apt to fly out on one just when one least expects it. For my part I prefer blondes very decidedly." Thereupon bestowing a telling glance upon Miss Gray, which set her heart fluttering and cheeks reddening very perceptibly.

Mrs. Grahame, gliding near, had overheard the fragment of conversation, and woke to her neglected duty on the instant. She sought out Dare, and before he knew her object brought him unexpectedly upon the two.

"Miss Montrose, permit me to present Mr. Dare. Quite a number have been asking if you will not sing, and I join my request with theirs that you will favor us. No, Sir Rupert, I want you elsewhere, and Mr. Dare will not lack in attention."

Mr. Dare offered his arm accordingly, and led the way to the instrument. He had met her as he would have done any stranger, making no sign. She had been expecting this moment, hoping for it, but for one instant the room swam and a suffocating sensation came over her. It was gone as she took her place at the piano: she was quiet, decided and calm as before. She gave one quick glance up into his face and said, in a voice inaudible to any except himself, as she struck a premonitory note:

"Let me see you somewhere for a moment alone." Then she sang in a clear, cultivated voice which already had won her a reputation among the guests at Thornhurst. Afterward Dare led her away to a deserted hall, where the lights burned low and waltz music pulsed faintly out again.

"Well, Venetia!" How very quiet and cold his tone was—how far from the tender accent which only he had used toward her a little more than two years before. If she felt the change she did not show it.

"I have wanted to see you, Owen. You have obeyed my instructions so implicitly I had no chance except by coming here."

"You must know that I do not consider that more discreet. I have a show for getting established here, as I told you once, one requiring careful manipulation still, and I should not suppose you would wish to lose it to me. I obeyed your instructions to hold no communication, because it seemed policy as well as that you wished it."

She was standing a little aside watching him steadily, and speaking unemotionally as himself.

"Have you heard that property lost during the war has been restored to my father?"

"It is no secret. The fact has been openly enough discussed through the whole neighborhood."

"I want to tell you the truth regarding it. It is only a barren waste, the plantation now; it was never much better than that; but papa has circulated a false report of its importance to further his own ends. You know how he has always hoped to gain some wealth and some position at last, and this means only new humiliation to me. The time has come now, Owen, when if you are willing to stand by me as I by you, I shall throw off this long oppression of my life. I will dare his anger and reproaches, anything gladly, to be openly acknowledged as your wife."

"You forget that you are not the only one interested in secrecy, Venetia. My future prospects depend upon it. It was your choice to keep our relations secret two years ago; it is mine now."

"Does that mean you have wholly ceased to care for me, Owen? You seem like it. Your prospect is the chance of employment here at Thornhurst, and few employers are influenced more by a man's relations than by his ability. If Colonel Vivian is an exception there are doubtless other opportunities for a willing seeker. Is it because you do not wish to acknowledge me, Owen, because you regret the bond uniting us?"

"Under the circumstances I do not wish it. You don't understand the affair; it is not probable you would if I took an hour to explain. You women are unreasonable creatures always. I have waited your time; you must be content to bide mine."

He was not returning her gaze; he was speaking sullenly; he was another man from the one she had loved and trusted thoroughly. She knew in that moment well as she knew afterward that it was his intention never to acknowledge her. She shrank for a second, all the color went suddenly out of her face, but there was hardly a change in her low voice.

"I understand; you will be glad to be rid of my presence here. I presume you know with the rest that we go South very soon. I did not expect this from you; I have not deserved it; but I would not sacrifice you to any man alive. This is your ring, the one with which you wedded me. Take it. When you cease to care for me it is time we part forever, as we do here and now."

The ring dropped into his passive hand; he saw her face for one moment as he saw it throughout his after life, still blanched, with great sorrowful eyes upon him; then she swept away and he was alone.

He was not wholly unmoved under his indifferent aspect; some remembrance of his old passion survived at seeing her bright and beautiful before him, but the selfishness which had ruled him all his life was predominant now.

"Better so," he thought, dropping the little gold

circlet into his vest-pocket. "I've only to keep rid of her suspicions for the time. If anything would tempt her to speak now it would be to save Nora; let it be too late for that and I am safe from her."

CHAPTER XVIII.

UNDER THE ELMS.

ANOTHER turn of the kaleidoscope, another succession of brilliant mornings, afternoons and nights, a whole week during which the gayety had not flagged, and New Year's eve was ushered in.

Thornhurst mansion was ablaze with light, alive with merriment. There was a grand ball there on this New Year's eve which was meant to close the dissipation of this holiday-time. It was not meant to close the pleasures at Thornhurst, but, as those to come would be of a quieter order and in greater moderation so this occasion was to eclipse all that had gone before.

Without it was a gusty night with ragged, black clouds chasing across the sky, with the moon and stars gleaming through at intervals, with the wind tearing like a moaning spirit through the bare drooping elms, and in the dark cedar grove a legion of unquiet spirits might have been confined, to judge by the plaints issuing from thence. A depressing, ghostly night with its rushes of light and shade, with a crisp snow upon the ground, but with the bitter air which had prevailed through the day softening, and some light flakes floating down as the ragged clouds gathered more thickly overhead.

Nora pausing in a window with her hand upon her escort's arm, shivered as she looked out upon the dreary scene. A band was crashing the Guards' waltz at their back, warmth and perfumed atmosphere and brilliant lights were about them, but one of those loud wint-wails pierced to their ears, mournful, eerie, as though it might have foretold a doom.

"If I were superstitious I should believe that some harm was to befall this house to-night," she said. "That sounds gruesome enough to be a banshee's warning."

Sir Rupert, looking for a moment with a shade of the gloom of night upon his brow, smiled down upon her.

"Abandon the dreary outlook then," he suggested. "Come and waltz with me instead. I don't very often dance, and you are one of the few who might tempt me to the indulgence."

"Your pardon, Sir Rupert. I claim Miss Carteret for the next waltz."

It was Mr. Telford coming up to remind her of her promise. "All men may not be favored of the gods, but few of us that will not wring recognition from the angels when we may. Never suppose I can be forgetful of a promise, however oblivious you may have become, Miss Carteret."

She took his arm with a glance around and a backward word to the baronet.

"There is Miss Montrose, cornered in by two merciless mammas interested in having their own pretty daughters near as possible first in the field. Can't you relieve her from that extremely uncomfortable position?"

All the gloom cleared out of the baronet's face on the instant. He had looked and looked in vain for Miss Montrose during the earlier part of the evening. It was not for him to know that once he had passed within two feet of her, and only the speedy intervention of Mrs. Grahame's voluminous skirts had saved him the discovery, or that lady on some plausible pretense had whisked her immediately away to the obscurest corner. Sir Rupert's awakened interest was apparent enough. Should the great part of the season, the wealthy baronet for whom half the beauty of New York was angling, be surrendered ignominiously to a young person who had never before been recognized by even the society here?—one who was most probably an adventuress and an interloper, for some hint of the worthlessness of that Southern plantation had got abroad notwithstanding all the caution of Walter Montrose. Never if subtlety of interested chaperone could effect a rescue.

Destiny was against Mrs. Grahame this once, however. Sir Rupert made his way directly to the obscure corner, and led Miss Montrose out of it, in gratified triumph.

"I was disappointed at believing you not present," he said, "inclined to quarrel with every one if you had gone off as I supposed you had without ever saying good-by. In that case I would have hunted you up in the morning to make my own adieu."

"You go soon, then?"

"To-morrow afternoon, New Year's Day though it be. I am to see a friend off for London on the third."

"My father and myself leave for Georgia the day after to-morrow. You will have the opportunity of saying a long farewell within the next two hours, Sir Rupert, since I leave here early. Quite a number of people make it a practice to turn a new leaf every New Year's Day, to begin a fresh era of their lives. I shall make my preparation by packing a trunk and leaving the dead past of six years spent here behind me."

"Do you throw off all remembrances so easily? I have an objection to saying that word 'farewell'; I shall ask you yet to let me make it *au revoir*. Can you tell me who is that gentleman just entering? He is the very image of a person I have seen."

She glanced up, a smoldering fire leaping on the instant into those slumberous, dark eyes.

"Who is he like, Sir Rupert? It is my father."

"Your father! And that makes another coincidence. He is the picture of what John Montrose, Earl of Cleveland, was a dozen years ago, of what young Lord Charles will be in twenty years to come. A vague reminiscence comes up to me, the recollection of hearing of a wandering younger brother of the house. Miss Montrose, is it possible—"

"Don't imagine it possible if you were going to

conjure up a relationship between our own and your noble Sussex house. America is a fine, large country, but all the black sheep of titled aristocracy need not of necessity have come here, or having come, need not be confounded with honest republicans who chance to bear the name. I at least would never covet the distinction of such relationship. Do you not find it very close here, Sir Rupert? Will you take me into the air for a moment?"

The quick eyes of Miss Montrose had seen that her father was making his way slowly toward them through the crowd, and her woman's intuition divined that it was with the object of being presented to Sir Rupert Archer, and more, that the baronet would fill in his mind the imaginary position he had up to this date ascribed to Vane Vivian. She never would fulfill the mission he had set aside for her—she had put it out of her power should the desire ever come—and she would not be the tool to throw an unsuspecting victim within reach of what must be futile machinations.

Walter Montrose had gained admittance through the sublime effrontery which characterized the man. He had fastened on young Telford at the village that day, plying him with questions relative to the doings at Thornhurst during the week past.

"You are going there to-night of course," he said. "So am I. Is it asking too much for you to take me up on your way?"

Telford, good-naturedly, promised. He was by no means a quick-brained young man, and it was five minutes after Montrose had gone before the idea struggled into his cranium that it was at all a strange matter for the latter to be going to Thornhurst.

"They've closed the vendetta, I suppose," mused Telford. "Whatever it was all about, the colonel always seemed to have a grudge bitter as wormwood against Montrose. It's been patched up through that magnificent daughter, I'd be willing to bet my roan."

Fortunately for the ownership of the roan, there was no one by to take the bet. Mr. Telford shaped the surprise which grew upon him during the day into words when he redeemed his promise that night.

"I thought the colonel and you made a habit of being at daggers' points," said he. "I did not know you had got about on sociable terms, and it is something of a wonder not to know all that has occurred in this neighborhood."

"I am not absolutely sure of it myself," rejoined Mr. Montrose, coolly. "I have not been formally favored with an invitation, but my daughter was solicited as a guest there, which I take as tantamount to extending the same courtesy to me. I'm willing to put into practice that good old maxim about forgiving and forgetting."

Mr. Telford had his own doubts in regard to which side forgiving and forgetting might most properly apply, but he had put the best face possible upon the matter and followed in the wake of Mr. Montrose when Thornhurst was reached, a trifle curious to witness the meeting between these two long-standing enemies. The colonel turned from one relay of arrivals to find himself face to face with Walter Montrose. For one instant they stood so, as duelists determined to fight it out to the last might have done, then the latter extended his hand, saying:

"To effect a reconciliation, it is necessary there should be an overture somewhere, Colonel Vivian, and I have taken it upon myself to make the overture. I am sure you will not refuse me a welcome, and I would not permit myself to be deterred for the lack of an invitation which might have been proffered had my frame of mind been known. I should like to know, when I leave here in two days more, that I am at peace with all the world."

A very commendable sentiment very smoothly uttered, but Walter Montrose was not the style of man to be ever quite at peace with all the world. There was a struggle in the colonel's heart. Had the man come there to gloat over the misery which had befallen him, or could he mean in reality just what he said? In either case, Colonel Vivian was too punctilious a gentleman to raise a scene then and there. His guests' eyes were upon him; he bowed frigidly, and not being able to overlook the extended hand, gave his. However sincere the other's profession may have been, with that act Colonel Seymour Vivian put aside his prejudices. Never a hypocrite, he would never give his hand to a man and cherish ill-will in his heart.

"Bygones are bygones," he said, "and you are welcome to Thornhurst, Mr. Montrose."

"I wonder if the millennium isn't coming," murmured Mr. Telford, who by this time had found his way to his inamorata's side. "Whoever would have supposed that rabid old lion, Colonel Vivian, would have given in so tamely? I looked to see him game to the last."

"At any rate, it's a mercy there was no scene," rejoined Miss Gray, and that was the unuttered thought in more minds than hers. One there felt the mortification of the encounter more deeply than the colonel himself, felt humiliated in herself that she had indirectly been the means of leading to it.

The baronet led her away from the thronged rooms, through a glass door opening from the library to a side veranda. He had left her for a moment and gone to the cloak-room to secure her wrap, a voluminous woolen mantle, which he placed about her shoulders. They were sheltered from the wind, a few stars shone brightly through a rift in the clouds, but at the best it was a wild night, with the prospect of a storm before day. She had asked to be brought here in the desire to escape seeing her father and the baronet brought together, and now that she was here, realized for the first the embarrassment of finding herself alone in his presence.

"A fitful night; I did not know to what I was tempting you, Sir Rupert. Let me make amends by

urging you back to the brightness of the rooms without delay."

"You do not appear to dislike it yourself."

"No; I have an odd passion for fierce tempests, a positive liking for all sorts of rough weather. Nature is never so alluring to me as in her wildest moods."

"You will be content to let me detain you here for a moment, then? I asked you back there to let me say *au revoir* at our parting. May I, in the course of a few months, come to see you in your Southern home? I will estimate it as a priceless boon to be granted the privilege."

His tone, more than his words, brought a new revelation to her. What could she say? There was only one course to pursue, but how could she refuse so as to least wound an honorable, high-toned gentleman? He went on speaking gravely and earnestly:

"I will not leave you in doubt of my motive, Miss Montrose. I have learned to care for you as I never cared for woman before in this single week since we first met. The time is too short to hope I have wakened any return. If the time ever does come when our acquaintance is prolonged, when you have learned to know me better, when you can give me an answer to what you must know is in my heart to-night, it will be time enough then to plead for myself. What I ask is not to hold you compromised in any degree, but to grant me the favor of becoming better known to you."

Her face was turned away, but there was a tremor in her voice as she spoke, showing how his confidence touched her.

"You do me more honor than I deserve by having thought of me so kindly, Sir Rupert. I must beg—it will be better if you never think of me again. I am grateful, believe me, and the best return I can make for such noble frankness as yours is to urge that you will never attempt to see me again; never think of me if you can help. Oh, Sir Rupert, what is that?"

She clasped his arm nervously, shaken from her habitual self-command. A cloud had broken, and the full moon shone down brightly for a moment. It shone upon a moving form among the elms, which drew back quickly into shadow. Sir Rupert, too, had seen the form, but his own solution for the appearance came with the momentary glimpse.

"Some one strolling out in the air, or perhaps a farmer's boy of the vicinity taking his view of the ball from a distance," he remarked, carelessly. "The wind is rising; I will not detain you here longer. But I must hope still for the permission I have asked before we part."

He held open the door for her to pass through, following himself, but left her with a word, the moment they reached the throng. He made his way to where Nora stood, for the moment unattended.

"Vane is here," he said, in a tone which should reach no ear but hers.

"Here?—where? Has he seen the colonel? Wait come this way. Now tell me."

A few steps placed a column between them and the crowd; and Nora's eager face uplifted, her brown eyes lit with expectancy and apprehension.

"He has not seen any one. I had but a glimpse of him, lingering under the elms, but I could not be mistaken. It was positively Vane. He has come, although I wrote to him it would be better not to do so, I could hope for no good from it, when I saw from day to day how bitter and unrelenting the colonel has been. I am going out to speak to him; naturally he does not wish to face all these guests, and is most probably waiting an opportunity to enter unobserved."

"Would you mind, Sir Rupert?"—Nora's face drooped and her flowing hair shaded it—"if I go instead? I should like to see Vane, and it may be my last chance. Colonel Vivian will not soften—he will order him from the house most probably, and Vane will go with no pleasant remembrance of this night."

"Go, by all means. I hoped you might wish for it."

She flew up to her room to throw a waterproof over her evening-dress, to thrust her slippers feet into fur overshoes, then sped down a back-way and across the snow-crusted lawn to the line of elms. The wind was just swaying the bare, drooping branches now, and there was light enough to show her a dark form leaning against a tree-trunk, watching the lighted front. He neither heard the light, fleet step, nor saw the approaching shape; she stood by his side and put out her hand to touch his arm before he was aware of her presence.

"Vane!" He started and looked around at her.

"Sir Rupert told me that you are going away, and I want to say to you how truly I regret the misfortunes which have estranged you from your home and friends."

"You are too lenient, Miss Carteret. There is no reason why you should not join with all the rest in denouncing the atrocious deeds of which I have been guilty."

"There is a reason," she said, meeting his moody eyes with brave, sympathetic glance. "I am your friend, even though you do not care to acknowledge me as such. I know you have felt hardly toward me and know why. I—I want to thank you"—her face drooped, and her fingers worked nervously with a button of her cloak—"for being so honest when the colonel proposed his plan to you. I never dreamed until afterward of his intention. He went to be reconciled with you that night, you know—"

"I beg pardon, I do not know," he interrupted. "He came to denounce me as I deserved, but it was none the less hard for all that."

"That was afterward. He did not find you at your lodgings; he returned to the house and met Dare, who took him to that place."

"Dare!" he gave her a keen glance. "Dare went with me there."

"He left you there while he returned with a story

for your father's ear which I believe was purely his own invention, of your desperation and his fear that you meant harm to yourself. A servant chanced to overhear the conversation, but was discreet enough to say nothing until the result came out. I believe still, as I did from the first, that he has been the means of bringing all this evil upon you."

Vane's lips compressed in a hard line. Doubts of Dare had crept into his mind of late, despite himself. His face softened as he looked at her.

"If you are my friend, Nora, it repays me a hundred-fold for the loss of those who were friends and have turned against me. I have only one thing to regret in my soul, and that is my father's just anger. I could not go away, perhaps forever, without making one effort for his forgiveness. If I ever redeem that part of my life which is past, I will come back; if not—"

She laid her hand upon his arm again with beseeching eyes turned upon his face.

"If not—you will let me say it to you, because I am your friend—if not, you will promise that no desperation shall ever drive you to attempt your own life again?"

A hot flush swept over his brow.

"You apparently know all about my recklessness. I do promise faithfully, since you ask it. I did not mean it even then. The pistol was in my pocket—some way, I found it in my hand. I don't believe I would have used it, but Dare wrenched my hand away and it went off. Hark!"

Wheels crushed through the crisp snow, and the moon coming out brightly showed a vehicle from the village livery-stable roll up the drive. A little, shabby man sprung down and ascended the steps of the mansion. In a moment the door opened and closed him in, and the two under the elms looked at each other wonderingly.

"That man came down in the train with me," said Vane. "I observed him, because we two were all to get off at the station. Don't look alarmed, Nora; his business is not apt to concern me. I have not been guilty of any later misdeeds."

Her cloak had fallen back, and the white moon-rays shone full upon her—on the pale, sweet face, the luminous eyes, the bright, floating hair, bound back with white roses and pearls—a picture which was a daily comforting remembrance to Vane Vivian for months after—which he never forgot while he lived. She looked for a moment up into eyes of golden-brown light, her hand lay in his warm clasp, and that moment stood out separate and distinct from any thing that had gone before in all her existence. Then he replaced her wrap reverently.

"I shall make my way to my old room when I can do so unobserved, and wait there until I can see my father alone. Say good-speed, Nora, and let me take you back to the house."

She said it with lips that quivered and with tears wetting her cheeks.

CHAPTER XIX.

A LIFE GOES OUT WITH THE YEAR.

The shabby little man admitted at that unseasonable hour had been ushered into the library, and there Colonel Vivian met him five minutes later.

"You wished to see me, sir?" he asked.

"If you are Colonel Vivian."

The colonel motioned assent to his inquiring glance.

"My business is important, but I can make it brief. Is this your signature?"

He drew out a pocketbook as he spoke, and with business-like dexterity extracted a slip of paper which he spread before the other's eyes. The colonel looking, turned white, his face took on a stony rigidity terrible to see. It was a check for fifty thousand dollars, drawn in favor of Abraham Moses, signed with his name.

"It is a forgery," he said, hoarsely.

The little man bowed and extracted a second slip, laying it before him in the same manner.

"This one has been realized upon. Is it genuine?"

There was anger in the colonel's gaze, his hand shook as he turned the paper over, and he said, in that constrained, unnatural voice:

"Like the other it is forged."

He reeled slightly and sunk back into the chair which his watchful visitor placed, his eyes on the other, with his hand motioning him to proceed.

"I am the bank's messenger. The smaller check for twenty thousand dollars was presented yesterday morning and cashed without suspicion. The other was offered during the afternoon, and, being for so large an amount, was subjected to more rigid inspection. The authenticity of the signature was doubted and the person presenting it—a Jewish money-lender of doubtful character—taken into custody on suspicion, which deepened when he referred to the party of the morning as his voucher. The Jew gave bonds for his appearance, and I was dispatched down here. May I ask what will your action be, Colonel Vivian?"

"What should it be?" asked the colonel, harshly. "The checks are forgeries; treat them as such."

"At the risk of tracing them beyond the persons yet involved? It is best to speak freely, sir. The testimony of the Jew and his friend will probably implicate your son. They aver that the checks were given in payment of debts of his contracting, transmitted through an agent purporting to come from you. Their dates are similar, three weeks back, and some difficulty which made it advisable for the precious pair to remain mum occasioned the delay in the presentation of the checks. The bank officers are your friends and are willing to hush up the matter if you desire it."

The colonel sat with his head thrown back, his ashy face unyielding as a rock.

"What is it you mean?" he asked. "What is it they would have me do?"

"Acknowledge the signature which has been hon-

oted as genuine. There is hardly a doubt but the story those rascals tell is the true one, and it is not probable the one will be frightened into refunding the cash. Let the other whistle for his; his own basis is too shaky to risk appealing to the law."

There was no softening of the old man's rigid features; it was no mercy towards the son who had been his idol once, who had brought such misery and humiliation upon him since, prompting the decision he had arrived at while the other was still speaking.

"For the sake of my old friends, to spare any loss to the bank, I will do what I would not do to avert the worst consequences which might overtake that unhappy boy."

"In that case I was to assure you there would be no one to appear against the Jew, and the sooner the false check is reduced to the consistency of ashes the less chance there is of it telling tales some time to come."

The colonel watched him apply a match to the spurious paper, watched it shrivel and fall in black flakes, and then roused himself.

"Accept my thanks for your own and your players' courtesy," he said gravely. "And now let me present you among my guests."

"Thanks, but I return immediately. I take the midnight-express from the village, and have little more than easy time to reach it."

"At least let me order you refreshments here," urged the colonel hospitably.

"Thanks again. I took supper at the inn after arriving. I would not choose anything more. Permit me to tender congratulations over the best possible ending of a very unpleasant affair."

"I believe the old soldier meant the very letter of what he said," soliloquized the bank-messenger, as he mounted his conveyance and cast a backward glance toward the mansion. "The young fellow might have taken his chances—chances good as certainty—for Sing Sing before he would have lifted a finger. It might be better for the world if there were more of the same stuff in other fathers."

What untoward fates were at work to have brought Vivian Vane to Thornhurst that night? He had come up into the very shadow of the house itself, the desire for reconciliation, for his father's forgiveness and blessing swelling in his heart to a positive pain. He kept to the side, walking slowly, intending to enter by a little used back way, but a stream of light from the glass door and the sight of his father's form erect and alone in the center of the library arrested him. One second later and he stood in that angered presence. The colonel had thought his cup of bitterness full, but it needed the blow of this night to make it overflow. Now as he turned and without warning faced the author of all the desolation come upon him, his stern rigidity of countenance struck a chill to the young man's soul.

"Father," he spoke, imploringly, "there was forgiveness for the prodigal, and forgiveness is what I have come to plead from you. Don't turn from me, don't spurn me as I deserve. Act of mine shall never disgrace you again. I am going away, forever it may be. You have been the best, the noblest, the most indulgent of fathers. Don't refuse me your blessing at the last."

Slowly the colonel's hand went up, slowly and in halting utterances his words fell:

"Not one step nearer. How dare you come beneath my roof—how dare you force yourself before my sight. You have cursed my sight, you have brought home to me the meaning of words never known to a Vivian before—shame, disgrace, treachery, crime."

"Father!"

"Silence! I told you weeks ago I had no son. I thought to cast you out of my life as I cast you out of my heart then. But the ties of nature cannot be severed at will. You have been to me since like a brand of infamy; I have been cut to the soul that your crimes must reflect upon me, must be ever a mortification and a reproach."

The younger man found it hard to realize that this was hasty, vociferous Colonel Vivian who spoke. There were none of the old abusive epithets, but this slow, heavy utterance was expressive of more deadly anger than had ever found vent in his fiercest tornadoes of wrath.

"Let me speak, I beg," pleaded Vane. "I have been guilty, I have caused you to suffer, and I have not one word to offer for my own palliation. You have been merciful where I did not expect it, you spared me when I deserved to suffer the most. I thank you and bless you for it now. If I live I shall never cease to strive to become what I have not been yet—the worthy son of such a father."

"Hypocrite! traitor! ingrate!" broke in fierce aspiration from the colonel's purple lips. Great knotted veins stood out upon his forehead, a clammy perspiration oozed there, and his hand clenched with the tenseness of a vise. "Go, and the curses you have earned, instead of blessings, follow you! Go!"

He pointed to the door. Vane would have remonstrated again, but that unwavering hand, that scathing gaze would brook no lingering. He went with a heart like lead, with feet which faltered in bearing him away. Across the lawn, where the wind was sweeping again, blindly on to the avenue gates, and there he came suddenly upon a tall, dark, female form, so suddenly that there was no chance of avoiding it, and the encounter recalled him to himself.

"Miss Montrose?" he asked, doubtfully, lifting his hat.

It was Miss Montrose. She had little inclination for city surroundings left after that frank, manly confidence from Sir Rupert. She had lingered to inform Nora of her intention to return home that night, had refused the use of the carriage proffered, and had slipped away unobserved and unattended

at the first opportunity. Walter Montrose was in the midst of his enjoyment within the walls of Thornhurst. He had attained his object; he had gained an introduction to the baronet; he had listened to Mrs. Grahame's praises of his celebrity, and succeeded in discovering his yearly income; had learned beyond doubt that Vane Vivian was disinherited without hope of recall.

The two met at the gate, passed a few casual remarks.

"Are you alone?" asked Vane. "I am on my way to the depot, but possibly I may have time to see you home; it is not much out of the way. I want to catch the midnight express."

The last word was scarcely out of his mouth, when a bell-like tone clef the air. Another and another followed; it was the clock in the village steeple striking twelve.

"Fortunately railway time is twelve minutes slower," said Vane, hurriedly. "Sorry I must leave you so abruptly, Miss Montrose. Good-night!"

He dashed away over the crisp frozen road. He dashed into the station just as the last bell of the already moving train clanged at its loudest. There was no time for a ticket; he sprang upon the platform with an impetus which seriously disconcerted a passenger standing there. Let in the while, less haste he failed to observe that it was the same shabby little man who had traveled down with him, who also had made an appearance at Thornhurst that night.

Within the mansion the tone of the steeple-bell mingled with the chime of a tall bronze clock in the hall.

"Now to watch the Old Year out and the New Year in," said Miss Gray.

"May we watch through all future occasions of the sort in the same way—together," murmured Mr. Telford, in supplement.

The sound penetrated to Colonel Vivian's dulled ear where he stood, almost as Vane had left him. He moved forward a few unsteady steps, and bent his forehead against the glass, looking out into the night. It seemed black with outer objects undistinguishable to him, but the old soldier's stalwart form cut against the light was the target for an erring aim. A ball of fire rushed, a sharp report drowned the last chime of the hour, a bullet shivered the glass, and Colonel Vivian, shot through the heart, fell heavily to the floor.

The Old Year and the old man's life had gone out together.

CHAPTER XX.

THE VERDICT.

The sound of the pistol-shot cut into a momentary silence which had fallen upon the throng of guests. They had stood still with one accord as the hour struck, and that sharp report ringing through the house thrilled quick terror into every heart. Nora, white as the dress she wore, sprung for the door; Sir Rupert almost as quick followed, and while the crowd rushed here and there in aimless panic, those two were first to gain the library, to witness the sight waiting them there.

The colonel's grand old face was upturned to the light—a white, dead face, with eyelids fallen, and a repose upon it which had not been there in the last moments of his life. It was as if death had brought to him alone the true knowledge of these later troubles which had imbibed his existence, as if even in death he had sent back the forgiveness which would never now be spoken.

A single stain of blood ensanguined his shirt-front, but not a breath flickered, not a pulse quivered, as Sir Rupert bent above the prostrate form.

For the first time in all her healthy, buoyant life, Nora fainted dead away. She was carried upstairs to her own chamber and left in charge of the attendants summoned. Mrs. Sholto Hayes was in violent hysterics, and half the ladies present reduced to a state of shocked and terrified helplessness. Mrs. Grahame's nerve and habitual self-command were brought out as perhaps they had never been brought out in all her life before. Her contained example did much to restrain the guests from those violent expressions of horror and confusion which so generally prevail at any great catastrophe.

The crowd was kept back from the library. A half-dozen gentlemen, among them a physician, were shut within the room. A single glimmer of light. Death had been instantaneous, and it was impossible, had it been desired, to keep the truth from the people about.

It was the colonel's old enemy, Walter Montrose, who broke the tidings to the shivering guests. Colonel Vivian had been shot through the heart, dead—murdered in the security of his own home, surrounded by a host of friends. At a hint from him the gentlemen present dispersed quickly through the grounds and followed the different outlets to a considerable distance in search of the perpetrator of the deed. A messenger was dispatched to the county authorities, a telegram was sent to the chief of police, Pittsburg, another to New York, calling for the best detectives in the force, all within two hours' time.

The first hurried search of the grounds revealed no trace of the criminal. The tramp of many feet obliterated any trace of individual footprints which might have borne import to skilled sight. One gentleman, examining every inch of the space within which the assassin must have stood, presently caught the glimmer of a substance frozen to the snow, half buried in it, under the eaves of the piazza. It was a small, silver-mounted pistol, which must have been flung there from the hand of the assassin.

"Great God!" cried Telford, sharply, at sight of it. "It is young Vivian's."

Dare pushed through the crowd at that. He was very pale and very collected, as he always was, in the face of a great emergency.

He had been first and most eager in the search but at the sight of the little evil-powered instrument, a rush of emotion mastered him.

"Oh, how unfortunate!" he exclaimed. "This will witness against him where there would have been no other witness."

Glances were exchanged. Mere surmises of suspicion which had been whispered before rose into demands now. No one was ignorant of the terms existing between father and son, and the pistol had the initials of the latter graven upon its plate. Three young men present declared they had seen it at different periods in Vane Vivian's hands. Had he been there?

Made suddenly aware of his indiscretion, so it seemed, tortures would not have wrung another syllable from Dare. He loved him like a brother, the people said among themselves; it was natural he should wish to shield him now. They honored him for his silence, and at the same moment, for the sake of justice, congratulated themselves that a power higher than his will would force him to speak, sooner or later.

Sir Rupert Archer turned sick at heart as he took a glance at the telltale weapon. He did not waver in the loyalty of his friendship for Vane; all the evil appearances which he realized might be brought to bear did not instill a doubt into his mind.

Soon the lights which had flashed hither and thither through the grounds went out. Carriages rolled away, one by one. Silent forms moved through the dimness of the great house now; the faded and drooping reminders of the late festivities were like mockeries, with those pale faces and solemn whispers stirring in the rooms. Daybreak brought the county officials to examine the place, to take such steps as might be in pursuing the criminal.

It was a strange, unnatural house, with the sound of heavy feet coming and going. It all seemed like some frightful nightmare to Nora, as she sat in her shadowed chamber, the dread spectacle of her guardian stricken suddenly lifeless always before her.

Sir Rupert had inquired at her door during the morning. Dare had been there for the third time, but forbore to intrude his presence. She was left alone except for a few moments Mrs. Grahame came in to sit with her.

There was an inquest held. The coroner, with a jury of twelve picked men, took possession of the library. Witnesses had been summoned from among guests present on the preceding evening, and members of the household. The business was conducted quietly, and with as much dispatch as was consistent with the nature of the evidence presented.

Sir Rupert Archer sworn. Had been among the guests in one of the drawing-rooms, the one fronting the west. Had heard the report of the pistol just as the clocks concluded the stroke of twelve. Had defined the sound as proceeding from the vicinity of the library. Was familiar with the interior of the mansion. Had rushed immediately thither, was the second person to enter; the first had been Miss Carteret. Had stooped over the body of the deceased, had looked up, saying—"The colonel is dead." Had caught Miss Carteret as she fainted, and carried her from the room. Had joined in the search subsequently, but had discovered nothing. Had not been aware of any suspicious person lurking about the premises during the day or evening. Mr. Walter Montrose had been among the first persons to enter the library after himself; could not say positively he was the first.

Mr. Montrose was not upon the witness list; he was not present. Owen Dare volunteered that he had been the third person to enter the room. His testimony was in substance a repetition of the baronet's, with the exception that he had stepped from the parlors and stood in the south hall as he counted the strokes, was standing there when the pistol-shot alarmed him. Had not positively defined the position of the sound, but hurried back, and seeing the library door open, entered.

Several others were sworn with but slight variations of the same testimony. Mr. Frederick Janes sworn, and in addition testified to the finding of a pistol engraved with the initials "V. V." accurately describing its position when found. Mr. Telford identified the pistol as one previously in the possession of deceased's son.

Sir Rupert Archer, recalled, admitted unwillingly to believing it the property of his friend. Had Vane Vivian been at Thornhurst on the preceding night to his knowledge? He had. Had Sir Rupert spoken with him? No. What were the terms between deceased and his son? Sir Rupert declined to answer. Was an animosity entertained which might lead to the committal of such a crime? On the part of the son positively not.

Mr. Owen Dare, recalled, also recognized the pistol as having belonged to Vane Vivian. Had been aware of the latter's presence upon the premises. Asked to relate what he knew of it. Unwillingly stated: he had stepped out of the heat to enjoy a cigar upon the veranda; had his attention arrested by a muffled female form crossing the lawn; a little curious to know the meaning of the appearance he had sauntered after and seen her join a man under the elms. He had been near enough to recognize the two as Miss Carteret and Vane Vivian, and immediately retired, himself unseen. After a few moments' stroll in the shrubbery he returned to the veranda intending to enter as he had emerged through the library. Was checked by the sound of voices within, and unintentionally overheard a fragment of conversation between the colonel and a person he had seen drive to the door. Did the conversation have any bearing upon the subsequent occurrences of the evening? Mr. Dare could not say. Did it throw any imputation against young Vivian calculated to prejudice the father's mind? It did.

THE TERRIBLE TRUTH.

Would he repeat what he had heard? Objected to, and the question was not pressed. He had been much in the company of deceased's son during the past two years; what had been the character of the latter? Very much the same of all young men of the world nowadays, a little wild, but a generous friend. Had he not been profligate to an extreme, desperate and reckless? Very unwillingly admitted he had been all of these. Mr. Dare was permitted to withdraw again.

It had not been deemed necessary to draw the ladies into this painful scene, and their evidence it was supposed would merely corroborate that already given, but now, after a whispered conference, it was decided that Miss Carteret must be called. Sir Rupert Archer went for her and she appeared below, a few moments later, looking wofully ill, her face like colorless marble, her eyes haggard. She was sworn and a chair placed for her by the coroner, who observed how weak she appeared, but gave her evidence in a clear, concise manner.

She had met Mr. Vivian under the elms; was not positive of the time; thought it something after eleven. She had gone out of her own accord to say good-by and assure him of her sympathy under recent misfortunes.

He had expressed no bitterness against any one in her hearing, certainly not against his father. Had admitted he deserved the latter's anger, and had come down to Thornhurst to sue for his forgiveness. The colonel had been very bitterly incensed against his son, influenced, she believed, by exaggerated if not false reports of the latter's conduct which had been given him. The coroner begged Miss Carteret would confine herself to facts, not to opinions. She was closely questioned, and while her own belief in Vane's innocence was apparent, her evidence strengthened the appearances against him.

The examination lasted the greater part of the day. At last the coroner summed up the evidence, spoke of the ill-terms existing between father and son, of the reckless, desperate character of the latter, of the evil habits to which it was known he was addicted, made a spirited appeal to the sense of justice which must reign in each good citizen's breast, spoke of the rapidity with which crime was advancing not merely among the low and vicious, but in our best families, like the instance now being discussed, that vice was corrupting our young men, evil proclivities and associations dragging them down to the level of russians and assassins. The verdict returned after a short delay was:

"Deceased had come to his death from effect of a pistol-shot fired by the hand of his son, Vane Vivian."

Before night a warrant had been issued for the arrest of the young man. Messages were flashing over the wires to New York and other principal points, accurate descriptions of his appearance and dress were given, the brand of murderer was set upon him, and the subtle power of the law put in force against him.

Mr. Walter Montrose walked home from Thornhurst at two o'clock of New Year's morning. The stars and the moon had been blotted out by inky blackness before this; the clouds that had been scattered during the earlier part of the night were massed overhead and the snow was falling fast in great, damp, clinging flakes. He had learned of his daughter's departure before leaving the mansion. No light broke the vague outline of the old house as he approached it, and he stamped into the blackness of the narrow passage, paused there to fumble for a lucifer, lit a candle and proceeded to the door of her room.

She opened to him immediately. She had not undressed and had a portion of her out-door wraps still about her.

"Not gone to bed, Venetia, and in the dark and cold? You indulge strange, not to say uncomfortable tastes. Can you make your arrangements to-morrow instead of the following morning?"

"What has happened?" she asked, a vague fear oppressing her as she read some unusual expression in his face.

"A very terrible occurrence. I am quite shaken from it yet. Colonel Vivian was shot, killed instantly, by an assassin from without his house. I have no great cause to mourn for him, but I don't know another person whose sudden death would have given me such a shock. There'll be an inquest and any amount of troublesome detective business, and I as one of those present might be detained as a witness. I don't want to be mixed up with the affair; I couldn't be of any good if I were, and it is an unpleasant sort of notoriety to attach, even in a remote degree, to any one."

"Is any one suspected?" she asked.

"No." Mr. Montrose had left before the finding of the pistol. "It was the act of a cowardly ruffian, and chances are probably more than equal against ever detecting him. To the question again, can you pack and be fit to travel by the earliest morning train?"

"Yes, papa."

"With nothing more onerous in the way of leaving things in charge than turning the key in the lock, this place may be trusted to take care of itself. Get a wink of sleep if you can, Venetia; you'll be fagged out before our journey is at an end."

Venetia moved about her preparations with an awe from the tragedy enacted so near fallen upon her, but withal glad of this sudden departure, which spared her the chance of again seeing either the baronet or Dare.

When that verdict against Vane Vivian was rendered, the one person who could have cleared him from suspicion was two hundred miles from Thornhurst, and, though neither of them knew it then, it was to be long years before the Montroses, father and daughter, would set foot in that Western Pennsylvania region again.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE READING OF THE WILL.

THREE days later the funeral cortege wended its way slowly out of Thornhurst. It was a dreary overcast day with fine snow whirling up under the horses' feet, when the desolation of grief marked by the hearse with its sable plumes and the long procession of mourning friends seemed echoed through earth and sky. The frozen clods fell with their first hollow sound upon the coffin-lid. Colonel Seymour Vivian, brave old soldier, lion-hearted, passionate, generous, noble with all his faults, was leveled to the lot of all mankind. "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust"—with his virtues and his faculties the old man was at rest.

Back to the desolate house again, which, less than a week ago, had been the seat of mirth, filled with thoughtless gay creatures, every corner echoing with the life and happiness within. A gloom was over all now, untold horrors haunted every shadowed nook, every cautious footfall and low-voiced word was but the ghost of a sound stirring the dreary space.

Mr. Grahame, in company with Sholto Norton Hayes, had come down from the city to attend the obsequies; with them had come Colonel Vivian's lawyer, and the little party remaining at Thornhurst assembled in the library late in the afternoon of that same day. Sir Rupert Archer had taken up his quarters, for the time at the hotel in the village. Dare retained his place in the mansion.

The company had assembled to hear the reading of the will, hastened to accommodate the return of those gentlemen whose business would take them back immediately to New York. Whispered surmises had been indulged whether or not the colonel had put his avowed intention into effect, whether he had made a new will, disinheriting his son, and in that case who might be the fortunate legatee. The two ladies, Mrs. Grahame and Mrs. Hayes, were the nearest relatives after Vane, and the grief of each displayed by crape folds and black-bordered handkerchiefs was not so intense but they had speculated hopefully upon their individual chances. Visions of the city house rejuvenated, of the new lustrous silks and royal velvets and flashing diamonds which became her so well, had crowded into Mrs. Grahame's mind in the very midst of the morning service and solemn duty. Similar visions of a new establishment half a mile further up-town, a brown stone palace surrounded by brown stone palaces, such a place as had been outside the limit of that moderate eighty thousand which did not quite remove her from the realms of the parvenu, awoke all the energy which was capable of being aroused in Mrs. Sholto Hayes. Who will blame them? It is always the way; life is a lottery; and Death very often deals out the winning ticket.

Fluttering hopes fell at the date of the will—"October 1st, 1867." Two years before, immediately after the departure of Vane Vivian for Europe, while the colonel's pride in him was strongest, and the noble old estate would go to the profligate that had been, the miserable criminal fleeing from justice that was, for, in the minds of the community and of these blood relations of his own, Vane Vivian was prejudged.

There were legacies, five thousand dollars each to Mrs. Grahame and Mrs. Hayes. (Blasted were all the fairy visions of new equipments and brown stone palaces!) Two thousand dollars to his son's friend, Owen Dare. A thousand dollars each to the butler and housekeeper, who had grown old in his service, some smaller legacies, and then:

The residue of all his estates, moneys, and personal property, was bequeathed to his ward, Lenore Carteret, on condition that she should become contracted in marriage with his only beloved son, Vane Vivian. In default of her consent, the estate of Thornhurst with half his personal property and moneys in fund, to be divided as thereafter named, should revert to his son, the remainder as therein-after specified to go to his ward as a token of his past friendship and affection for her father, Edwin Carteret, and his love for herself.

Then followed a minute description of personal effects and their division, with Richard Grahame appointed as his executor, to whom was bequeathed the sum of five thousand dollars to cover such trouble and inconvenience as he might encounter in carrying out the wishes therein couveyed.

Duly signed and attested according to law.

There was a little flutter, a little murmur, checked suddenly as the lawyer proceeded to unfold another document, and announced:

"Codicil to the foregoing will and testament of Seymour Vivian, dated December 10th, 1869."

"Hopeful expectations in the ascendant again.

In addition to the legacies already bequeathed to Mrs. Grahame and Mrs. Hayes ten thousand dollars each, a total of fifteen thousand each.

In addition to two thousand dollars bequeathed to Owen Dare three thousand more, a total of five thousand dollars.

The foregoing disposition of all remaining estates, moneys and personal property revoked, and all bequeathed unconditionally to his beloved ward and adopted daughter in his affections, Lenore Carteret, to her and her heirs and assigns forever. In case of his decease during her minority Richard Grahame was appointed as her guardian, and finally in addition to said Richard Grahame, to act jointly as executors and trustees, Sholto Norton Hayes, and a final bequest of ten thousand dollars each as a token of good will and recompense for trouble attending the business devolving upon them, and a yearly allowance to the appointed guardian of Lenore Carteret for whatever time, if any, she might remain an inmate of his house and home.

Attested and signed.

"Such, ladies and gentlemen," concluded the lawyer, laying down the document. "are the last wishes

of our deceased friend, Colonel Vivian. It will not require for me to urge that they may be sacredly observed. Let me be the first to congratulate Miss Carteret upon her accession to princely wealth, and to hope that my own connection in a business way with the owner of Thornhurst may continue in the future as it has been in the past."

The lawyer crossed briskly to the spot where Nora sat, her head resting against her chair, her face in shadow, her hands locked in her lap, motionless as a statue through all the reading except once when a shudder passed over her when her own name was mentioned first. She had been as still, as undemonstrative ever since the verdict of the coroner's jury had been rendered. The sight of her kind old friend as he lay in his coffin had not moved her. Great as her own desolation and grief might be there was an ever-present horror before her so infinitely greater that all else was swallowed up beside it. All the occurrences passing about her had seemed unreal. She had strained her attention to comprehend the meaning of the will, hoping for some expression of forgiveness and assurance of paternal affection which might yet comfort Vane, and instead came the knowledge that struck her like a curse. She was the one to usurp his inheritance; through her he had become a wanderer upon the earth, an outcast from his home, worse than all that, a man hunted by his fellow-man. But for her Colonel Vivian would have forgiven him seven times seventy times if need had been. Out of darkness closing around, that thought glared at her as though written there in letters of fire.

"Great heavens!" cried the lawyer, stooping over her. "Air here! The young lady has fainted. Such is the result of great and unexpected good fortune."

A window was thrown wide. The rough winter breeze swept chillingly through the room. Nora had not fainted, but she lay back in her chair in a death-like stupor from which no ordinary method would revive her. The great shock of Colonel Vivian's murder, followed by Vane's accusation of the crime, working upon her these last three days had received a final touch through the accession to this fortune which those about were envying her.

Before night she was in a delirium of brain-fever, which brought the gravest of looks into the face of the physician called to attend her.

Sir Rupert Archer remained in the village. The steamer in which Vane's passage was taken had left on the third, but Vane had not gone in her. Detectives had been on the watch at the depots and about the docks. His town lodgings had been kept under constant surveillance, half a dozen different clews had been taken up and followed, but all ended alike in nothing. At the end of a week the authorities began to consider the case in hand one of extraordinary difficulty, and a few whose sympathies were at first enlisted for the young man took this successful elusion of the law as an evidence of more hardened villainy, more deeply-plotted criminality than they had first supposed. Among his whole circle of acquaintances but one stood for him openly and unwaveringly, Sir Rupert Archer.

Nora was lying at the very gates of death. It was weeks before any change for the better took place, weeks of anxiety and watching, during which Thornhurst was gloomy and silent as a tomb; but young, strong vitality conquered at last. It was March before she was about the house again, the thin, pallid ghost of her former self, all her wealth of warm hair gone, and in its place little rings of softest brown curling about temples and forehead where the blue veins showed through the transparent skin.

April with its tears and smiles, its clouds and sunshine came. By the middle of the month Nora went to the little brown cottage, on the Cape Cod coast, to the two faithful old people, who, separated as they were from her, had more power to comfort her sore-stricken heart than the worldly people about her. First she had a private interview with her guardian, who came down to Thornhurst for a couple of days previous to accompanying her on her journey east. She wished it distinctly understood that she would never accept the fortune which had been left to her. The rightful heir would some day return, prove the charge preferred against him untrue, and until then the property must be held in trust, every penny be rigidly accounted for. She would go back to her old friends until she was stronger, and afterward find some means for her own maintenance.

"I suppose you mean you will teach district school, or give music lessons, or take in embroidery," said Mr. Grahame, rubbing his smooth chin, scarcely concealing his contempt for the Quixotic sentiment with which he had no sympathy. An inordinate appreciation of money had sprung up through his own hard rub with the world. It was an act of folly and recklessness for a young girl to throw away a fortune of a million—Mr. Grahame was not wholly uninfluenced by the yearly sum accorded himself—an act he would never countenance. "Very fortunately for yourself, my dear, Miss Carteret, you have not the power at present to carry out this benevolent scheme of yours. The late Colonel Vivian's will cannot be set aside, and you are bound to observe the conditions of it for the three years of your minority. Of course if you hold to your present ridiculous fancy you can will away the fortune when you come of age, but"—with gloomy import—"for the sake of the old name it is to be hoped Vane Vivian will never be heard of again. If he is found there is little enough chance of his ever needing Thornhurst."

For three years, of her own will or not, Nora would be the heiress of the Vivian fortune.

In all this time there had been no trace of Vane. The heat of the search after him was over. The sharpest detectives had been baffled. Vane Vivian the accused murderer, had disappeared in the very hour which had witnessed the committal of the

West, climbing the grand hoary old mountains, exploring the gold-veined regions of California, and drifting gradually southward to these unsettled dominions where you might suppose my adventures had been hairbreadth and frequent enough to satisfy the most daring, much less a peaceable and easy-loving individual such as I claim to be. But I tear myself away from the fascinations of this rude life with deep regret. Here is a tropical climate, but relieved from oppressiveness, a soil which produces voluntarily the richest fruits of the earth, a natural Garden of Eden, but unfortunately inhabited by a people who neither know how to govern themselves nor submit to government, whose incessant revolts make it dangerous for strangers, where no man can trust his neighbor, no one be secure from petty depredations. I leave it all, however, not from choice, but because Archer Hall must be sadly needing me. I have a desire to be a good landlord to my tenants, a worthy representative of the Archers dead and gone, and though I have full faith in my trustworthy steward I am not sure that I have lived to the strict letter of my duty."

"And so, concluded Nora, "he expects to be in New York before the middle of October, next month. We must go back to the city in time to meet him there, Mrs. Grahame."

"What an odd girl you are, Nora. Sir Rupert must consider you so, to write that style of a dry, technical letter."

"Dry!" cried Nora, indignantly. "It is full of interest. I am glad that Sir Rupert Archer *does* think well enough of me to spare me the sort of wishy-washy missives some gentlemen consider all that can reach the comprehension of their lady acquaintances. As to being odd, I wouldn't be any one else than I am, Nora Carteret, free and independent that is to be very soon, for all the world."

"I've always wondered," continued Mrs. Grahame, "whether or not you threw over the baronet. He was certainly very attentive at one time, and I thought—at least I hoped you were going to do credit to the opportunity. You have rejected a dozen of eligible offers since, and I have been quite a while intending to ask you, has it really been on account of the baronet?"

"Oh, Mrs. Grahame! Throw over the baronet! Sir Rupert is too sensible a man to be thrown over, by far too sensible to have bestowed a thought on me, in *that* way. He is almost the only man who never made me silly speeches, who took it as a matter of course that I was clever enough to understand the plain English of plain topics. Don't undertake match-making for me. I have laid out a different course for myself, and your well-meant plans are sure to be disappointments to yourself."

"Really, Miss Nora Carteret, you can be self-willed and aggravating as a spoiled child. If the baronet should be coming back here, for the precise purpose of making the proposal he has not made yet—if he should wish to take you back to England with him, you surely never will be so crazy as to throw away the chance? Think how it would sound to be my Lady Archer, of Archer Hall."

"You are determined not to believe what I say, that Sir Rupert will never give me the chance, and that I am glad through knowing it."

"With all his letters to you and yours to him I have had grounds for hoping better."

"I told you the object of our correspondence once, Mrs. Grahame. If Vane should come back or if you should hear from him it was that the other might know at once. It is very strange that we never should have heard from or of him."

"By no means very strange. I can only wonder at your persistency in clinging to that thought, Nora; the more especially of your singular faith in a possibility which is contradicted by all evidence of appearance. The best you could wish for that debraved and criminal young man, if not already dead, is that he may be so dead to the world which knew him once he might never be heard of again. It sickens me to think of the weather. Are you going to drive this afternoon, Nora? You have only a half-hour in which to dress."

"Not if you will hold me excused. It is hot as August, and much pleasanter here in *neglige* than grilling under that sun in full toilet."

"Nora! Have you forgotten the races? And that the favorite entry is decked with your color, and that the result will be the same as a personal victory to whose ever color wins? I especially desire that you shall drive this afternoon, and if you could rouse yourself from that supreme indifference to all sublunar objects and enjoyments for this one occasion, it will be a matter of gratification to me. It is well to carry yourself above enthusiasm; too vociferous expression is never in good taste; but you are apt to go to the further extreme. There; I will ring for Corinne for you, and pray make haste."

Mrs. Grahame touched the bell-pull as she swept out, herself already in full carriage-dress; but it is a half-hour's task for a lady of forty-five to adjust last touches before her glass, to settle her bonnet, to draw her veil to the proper angle, to modify years which never set more hardly or leave more vivid traces than in this hollow fashionable life.

It was hot, that late September afternoon. A hazy cloud or two floated close to the horizon, and a great fiery sun looked down from the jacinth vault above into another jacinth vault with another fiery orb reflected in the sea below; the sun beat upon the sands and upon the gayly-dressed throng, ladies in carriages, gentlemen in the saddle, mounted on benches, or pressed in a tight, perspiring crowd about the course.

"For my part," said Nora, looking out from the shade of her parasol, a dainty, diminutive concern of violet silk and foamy with lace, "I have far more sympathy with the splendid animals to exert themselves here, than for all that mass of miserable, dusty, scorching human kind. And I have no doubt

the poor things absolutely believe they are enjoying themselves. I take my own punishment for participating with a good grace, just as we all accept the inevitable retribution which follows close upon our everyday faults. I suppose the recording angel would have too much business on hand to put down the whole score, and we ought to be thankful the greater the number of our transgressions which recoil upon us here below."

"My dear," reproved Mrs. Grahame, virtuously shocked.

"Where is justice if Miss Carteret is not spared the penalty?" murmured a masculine voice at her side. "I thought that angels had no faults."

Miss Carteret looked around with coolly surprised glance. Dare had pressed up close, on the back of a magnificent bay.

"Oh, you?" she said, frostily. "I was not aware you were here."

"Nor glad of it?" There was a reproach in the murmur now. "I would not for half a world have missed this occasion."

"I would have missed it most gladly but for Mrs. Grahame's pertinacity. She leaned back in her seat, softly swaying her fan, watching the ring as the richly caparisoned horses were led in, as thoroughly unconcerned as though Owen Dare had been a thousand miles away instead of at her elbow. He should have grown accustomed to disdainful treatment such as this, but it made him secretly grit his teeth, nevertheless. Time had not decreased the resolve he had once taken; he had not lost sight of it for one day or hour; he had steeled himself as he always did in a delay, he had become inflexible as iron in the purpose nearest his crafty, selfish heart. He had been horribly patient, these last two years; he had found his advances repelled, and he had waited his time—the time near at hand now, a thought of which would bring a flush to his cheek, a glitter to his eyes that had never failed before in finding a mastery in their soft, false expression.

"The time is coming," he thought, looking down upon the proud head, the listless shape, "and when it does come, I scarcely know which would give me the greatest pleasure, to win you or crush you. For the sake of Thornhurst it shall be the first, and because I have no reasonable hope of effecting the last."

"There is Blue—blue is your color, Miss Carteret—and Rose, and White," he leaned forward to say. "Is that all? Then the tricolor has withdrawn. Do you know that I have departed from a fixed principle in honor of the day? Betting is my abhorrence, but I have been betting on the Blue. Are you willing to wager a box of gloves against your own color?"

"By no means, Mr. Dare. Fixed principles should be observed, and I could not reconcile my conscience in accepting your introduction to a vice you abhor."

"As a vice. In the way of compliment it is another thing."

This required no reply, and Miss Carteret was accordingly silent.

"Who is it?" asked Mrs. Grahame, whose view was obstructed. "To whom are you talking, Nora?" Nora drooped her parasol, and Dare pressed his horse forward a pace. "Oh, you, Owen? I don't suppose there's anything amiss. When did you come down?"

"By the afternoon train, less than two hours ago. The occasion called me, of course, and I am at hand to congratulate the winner. The idea is not a bad one, this way of deciding between the reigning belles, though it may be borrowed from our English cousins, and in my opinion the issue need not have been contested at all."

"We are to see more of you than this?"

"To your sorrow," laughed Dare. "I have a message for your own private ear, Mrs. Grahame."

"Ah, well!" The lady gave him a sharp glance, but settled back complacently and raised her glass. The money market had been more than usually tight of late, and it had come to be such a chronic disease in the Grahame establishment to be hard up that the lift conveyed by Colonel Vivian's will proved but a temporary alleviation. The mansion had been fitted anew from roof to cellar when it was again open to company. The dollars had run out in a steady stream, until of late a stern check had been put upon the lavish outlay. Mrs. Grahame was finding herself hampered here in this expensive resort. She had sent a telegram that very morning for additional funds, and shrewdly guessed that Dare had brought down the reply. It would doubtless have been a trying position for many a woman, but it was an old story to her. She was schooled against suspense as well as all the trepidations and flutterings that common natures are heir to.

Meanwhile the horses had been trotted gently round the track, betting-books figured conspicuously in the first circle; then with favors glistening in the sun, with arching necks and glossy coats, the racers were drawn head and head at the starting-place. The word was given, and they were off like arrows from a bow.

"White is ahead, but that signifies nothing; Blue next, and Rose in the rear."

"Another fifty on the Rose for all that."

"Do you bet, Dare? Ten on White to five for the others."

"I'm not a betting man, but I'll go a fifty on the Blue."

"Cigar money for a fortnight," laughed the other. "You're out for your trifles, old fellow."

"The result will show."

"Rose gains! Hurrah for Rose!"

Rose did gain, passed the blue on the first heat, and at the close of the second was neck and neck with the White.

"Dear, dear me, Nora, I am really apprehensive that you will lose," said Mrs. Grahame, anxiously.

"Not that it can make any real difference, of course, but it will be a gratification to the winner."

"Of course Blue will lose," asserted Nora, indifferently. "I predicted it from the first, you remember."

"Rose is ahead," cried an excited voice. "The last round and Rose ahead. White gains again; Blue is coming up—White lags!"

"Well done, Blue, but you may as well give up the battle. Rose is in for it!"

At the last half-round the ladies in the carriages rose *en masse*. Nora remained in her place, quite unconcerned throughout, but Mrs. Grahame stood upon the seat with the lorgnette forgotten, her own keen eyes quite sufficient unaided at the crisis.

"Well done, Blue!" Again a murmur of disappointment from the supporters of the White, and the other two were neck and neck. At the last quarter, Blue shot ahead and came in past the winning post, first, by three full lengths.

A shout went up. There was the confusion of many voices. Bettors went about receiving and paying their dues, and the defeated belles at another point, overlooking the course, received the sympathy of their followers.

"Let me be the first to congratulate you," Dare said, bending over to touch Nora's gloved hand.

"May I see you this evening?"

"I shall appear in the parlors, and they are free to the public, I believe."

"What pains you take to tell me my presence is not welcome, Miss Carteret. I shall see you this evening, nevertheless."

He wheeled his horse and pressed with some difficulty to the opposite side of the carriage.

"Can't you speak a good word for me, Mrs. Grahame? You know what my hopeless passion is, and I shall not very much longer remain in this suspense. I have concluded 'to put it to the touch, to win or lose it all!'"

"You know I favor you, Owen, but there's no moving Nora from her own way. I can try, if you like, but I warn you it will be of no use."

"The best of us can do no more than try, you know. Do you return at once? I will call at your rooms an hour from now, if it suits your convenience."

Nora, engaged on her side, heard nothing of this, but suspected it, when Mrs. Grahame set the ball rolling on their homeward way.

"Owen Dare has become what I always predicted—a rising young man through his own efforts. Positively, the most promising in all my circle of acquaintance. You treat him with absolute cruelty, Nora. You are not apt to find another lover as truly devoted, and with such a brilliant prospect as he is bound to attain. I would not urge your consideration of him if the baronet were in the question, but as it is—"

"As it is, don't urge anything, Mrs. Grahame. Mr. Dare is not in ignorance of my sentiments, though he has chosen to ignore them."

"You are absurdly prejudiced. There are plenty young ladies would not wait a second offer from Owen Dare."

"Pity you couldn't persuade him to be satisfied with one of them. It would be an immense relief to me. Tell him so if he set you to speak for him."

Mrs. Grahame did tell him so in almost those very words when he presented himself an hour later.

"You know how gladly I would encourage you, if I could," she said. "But there's no use hoping against hope, and one might as well attempt to move a mountain as that obdurate girl. I'm sure I don't know what she wouldn't stop at when she once has any notion fixed."

"You shall see yet," and Dare's eyes held an ominous glitter. "You have not succeeded in discouraging me. Your pardon for thus engrossing your attention when you must be anxiously awaiting Mr. Grahame's message. I regret to say he found it impossible to respond to your request, and suggested it might be expedient to hasten your return to town—to make it immediate in fact. But if you will permit me to proffer a small advance—no, don't refuse until I am through. I am sure you are desirous of staying another week or two at least. Let me do myself the pleasure of supplying you with such funds as you may need, and ask in return a much greater favor, that you will stand my friend in my intention to marry your husband's ward."

Something in his voice, something in his face, carried deeper meaning than his words. He pressed something suspiciously like a crisp new bank-note into her hand, and Mrs. Grahame, in no way disconcerted, said, graciously:

"You couldn't expect me to take sides against you, Owen. You always were a favorite of mine, as I have told you before. You may count on me!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE COUNTING-ROOM.

"Am I to have the pleasure of the coming waltz, Miss Carteret?"

Owen Dare had held aloof for an hour, watching her as she moved through the lighted rooms, everywhere admired, everywhere a favorite. She had never looked purer, never fairer. Dressed in white, shimmering silk and foamy lace looped into billowy clouds, with pearls at her throat and in her hair, she was generally conceded the queen beauty of all the beauties gathered there. "Rare and radiant," the sight of her thrilled Owen Dare's heart as it had never thrived before. The very disdain expressed by her treatment of him left him the more earnest, the more determined. He approached her as she stood alone one moment to put the question.

"I am already engaged."

"The next, then?"

"I am also engaged for it—for all, indeed."

"At least, a quadrille."

"Pray excuse me, Mr. Dare."

"You will not dance with me, you mean? When beauty winks there's nothing left but to obey." He bowed and drew back as her escort came to claim her, with a more passionate demon in his soul than had been there yet. He had been cold-blooded in all his villainy heretofore, but that night and that moment he would have sold himself for all eternity for power to wield her heart as she might have wielded his.

Mrs. Grahame, covertly watching, wondered what plan he could have in his mind to subdue that willful girl.

As he could not dance with the lady of his choice, Mr. Dare did not dance at all. He was lost to sight soon after, and the argus-eyed matron who was pledged to be his friend, supposed he had withdrawn in disgust. Nora did not even give him a thought. He was out of her sight, his pale, insincere face was not the Gorgon head to spoil her present enjoyment, and that was all she asked.

The evening was almost over. She had been congratulated over the triumph won by her color, she had danced with every one of the score of admirers laying claim to her favor; she had given Dare a quietus for the time and she had caused her conscientious chaperone an unlimited amount of trouble in shadowing her fittings—two by no means unimportant additions to her enjoyment—and began at last to consider the entertainment monotonous. She sent away her escort on some pretext, slipped through curtains just stirring in the breeze, and stood on a little balcony alone under the purple night-sky with myriad star-eyes looking down.

She sank into a seat with a quivering sigh. It was such a contrast, this stillness, peace, and universal harmony, to the heat and the crowd and the false and hollow pretensions at her back. Her appreciation of it was spent in that one long breath.

"Lovely, is it not?" said the one voice which of all she had come to detest. "What more perfect scenic effect than this, subdued yet distinct, ocean and sky, and masts which might be clouds hung apparently in the middle of space."

"Mr. Dare is so eloquent upon the theme I will not linger to disturb his enjoyment of it."

He gathered the sweeping folds of her dress together and half-rose, but he drew back a step between her and the window which was the only means of entrance.

"Favor me with your attention one moment, Miss Carteret. You shall not be long detained. I came down to-day for the express purpose of saying what I have to say, and you shall hear it."

She inclined her head with just the slightest perceptible token of assent and looked away into the purple dimness of the night. If he would push matters to an extreme, the sooner his disclosure came the sooner she might expect to be free from his persistent and unwelcome attentions. It was no surprise to her that his words were brief and straight to the point:

"Miss Carteret, I have been devoted to you and to you alone for three long years. You cannot fail to know how I love you. Will you be my wife?"

She trifled with her fan as her eyes came slowly back to him. He could have gnashed his teeth in impotent rage at her utter cool indifference.

"You cannot fail to know what my answer must be, Mr. Dare. Since it is your wish to hear it in words, pray understand me to distinctly decline."

"Let me beg you will reconsider my proposal. I cannot offer you all the advantages, perhaps, you might gain with some of those popinjays who have been about you all evening, but the time will not be long coming when I can place you high above them all. Think of my long devotion. You will never find a heart more truly and wholly yours."

"If I were to think all my life it could not alter my decision."

"Yet I must ask you to consider once again. You have avowed your intention of making a very Quixotic sacrifice, of renouncing the wealth you have enjoyed, the luxuries and refinements which have attended it. Nature fitted you for a life like the one you of late years have led, never for poverty and a hand-to-hand struggle with the world. Let it be my pleasure to supply you with all you will relinquish."

"Since when have you become so tolerant of my purpose? I have fancied that Thornhurst rather than myself has been the object of that devotion which you make a boast."

"Then you have done me bitter injustice. I frankly avow I do not approve your purpose, but it is for you to decide that. Before ever Thornhurst was yours, before yourself suspected your succession to that fine old estate, I loved you as I love you now. You must remember and acknowledge that."

"I remember that you were in Colonel Vivian's confidence, that you had access to his papers, and most probably were acquainted with his plans. You choose to ignore a time still further back, which I have never forgotten. When you amused yourself by playing upon a little simple country girl's affections, as you supposed; that it was in reality a less tender attribute, simply an untutored girl's vanity, which was fostered for the time, was no fault of yours. That little episode of the Cape Cod coast gave me an approximation of your character, Mr. Dare, which has not been improved during our acquaintance since."

"You are hard on me, considering your own experience, Nora. When have you ever spared a man because he was young, inexperienced, untutored? I will not say had you remained there, come to maturity in those surroundings, with no more advantages than you were apt to command, that I would ever have spoken the words I have uttered to-night; but even then and there I recognized the diamond in the rough. It was reserved for later years to show me the polished, priceless gem."

"Enough, Mr. Dare." She rose as she spoke, scarcely concealing her unaffected disdain. "The

old story grows tedious. Be kind enough to let me pass."

"One moment more. Will you not give me a hope of relenting? Am I to take this answer as final, irrevocable?"

"As final and irrevocable, Mr. Dare."

"Will you tell me why you reject me so decidedly? If you were quite heart-free you would not be so cruel. Who is the fortunate man to win where I have failed?"

"You presume, sir!"

"It is not the baronet, upon whom Mrs. Grahame based her hopes. Possibly your intention of renouncing Thornhurst is not the purely unselfish motive which it has been ascribed. It may be the warm friendship so earnestly avowed more than two years ago was more than friendship even then. You spoke of approximating character a moment ago, Miss Carteret, but you are very lenient to criminality."

The slender form drew to its fullest height; angry scorn flashed in the dark eyes.

"I was aware you had done us the honor of watching, that night. I did not know you had played the more despicable part of eavesdropper, as well. It is no more than I might have expected of you, but it is enough to mark your reference as the height of presuming insolence. It is not so strange that you cannot comprehend a disinterested friendship. Now, sir, stand aside and let me pass."

He drew aside immediately.

"I venture to assert you will yet accord me greater justice as well as a more favorable answer than this you have given me to-night, nevertheless."

She swept past with no further word, and Owen Dare was left to contemplate scenic effects or occupy himself with his no doubt pleasant musings, to his own taste. He returned to town by the early morning train, and the gay Long Branch frequenters saw him there no more.

The dingy counting-room of Richard Grahame, merchant, was favored with his presence the afternoon following his return. It had been hot on the beach; it was stifling in the little dark room where the power which upheld the avenue mansion was centered. Mr. Grahame himself was perspiring over a small mountain of ledger, but it was cold perspiration on even that sultry September afternoon. Money was tight; the fashionable matron at Long Branch had been inconvenienced by the fact; the merchant in his counting-room was more than inconvenienced—he saw before him a crisis—a chasm he could hardly hope to bridge.

He looked up impatiently, as the door opened, but turned half about at seeing who it was, and pushed the damp hair back from his worn face.

"Hot," said Dare, dropping into a chair. "It's too intense for steady work like this of yours, Grahame. You should lay off for a week or a day. It begins to tell on you."

"You make your own jaunts short it appears to me."

"I am young yet, you know; I can stand hard work now, if I ever can. I'm back from the Branch, and this girl we will make arrangements to return within a fortnight."

"So much the better," said Mr. Grahame, nervously. "At once. I told you that distinctly, I did."

"You did. Truly to tell, I made the little advance necessary for prolonging her stay. No doubt Miss Carteret would have done the same, had she known the exigency."

"Not she. She is too much bound up in that preposterous idea of giving up everything in a few months more—giving to the winds though it will be—whether Vane Vivian ever turns up again or not. She would not have consented to use her income but for the yearly allowance, and my own representation of what Colonel Vivian's wishes would have been. You meant well enough, I have no doubt, but I wish you had carried out my instructions to the letter. Lusa has too good sense to impinge me when she knows what a pressure there is, and every dollar will be of avail in this cramp."

"If a few thousand for a few days will tide you through, I may be able to raise it."

"Thanks, no. Time is what I want more than money. Two months' time would be better to me than a hundred thousand to-day; but I have had two extensions already, and I can't ask for a third."

Dare tapped his fingers with a little pearl-handled knife he had drawn from his pocket, and glanced at the pile of ledgers upon the desk.

"I suppose I know more of your business than any other man in town," he said. "I have a proposal to make after I tell you of a proceeding of my own. I went down to Long Branch for the purpose of making an offer of marriage to your ward, and I was rejected."

"Ah!" The merchant was evidently neither very deeply interested nor much surprised at the result.

"For all which I am here to ask your sanction of my suit. I am not discouraged. I want to marry Miss Carteret, and I want your influence on my side. I am not beyond my reckoning in supposing I can count on you?"

"You have no knowledge of Nora if you suppose my influence would have any weight with her in a matter like that. The most willful, perverse girl I ever saw in my life, when her mind is once set. Begging your pardon, she never did take to you, Dare. She is not apt to like you better if you badger her now."

"I don't ask you to make her care for me. That will come of itself in time, or if it don't—my object is to marry her. For the promise of your aid so far as lies in your power, I will engage to procure you the two months' extension you would like."

"You know what that time will be to me. Dare, and

you know the mettle of the girl. I might promise readily enough, but I couldn't give you any hope. Plenty of girls will say 'No' and mean 'Yes,' but Nora is not of the kind."

"Never was a shrew who could not be tamed; never a girl who might not be broken. Even that high-spirited ward of yours may be rendered docile and obedient, Mr. Grahame. The question is, will you do your part toward making her so?"

"Tell me plainly what you're driving at," said the merchant, uneasily. "For my own part I don't see that Nora could do better, but if she has refused you I don't see how you are going to help yourself letting the matter end there. I'd rather not mix myself in it at all."

"Not for fifty thousand dollars on our marriage-day? Your services will be worth that, and I can afford it out of the dower my bride will bring. Any other guardian would prove her crazy as a Bedlamite and send her to an asylum through her wayward notions. You can do better; give her into my hands and I will answer for controlling her afterward, and you'll realize handsomely for your share in the matter. What do you say?"

"I don't understand your drift yet. A girl can't be made to marry against her will, in this day, and Nora will never consent, you may be sure."

"Stranger things might happen than either of those. There are more ways of breaking a woman than one. Nora has been two years in society now, and, like any other girl, would die of *ennui* to be cut off from it suddenly. My plan is, instead of bringing her back to the city, to send her on to Thornhurst alone. Your embarrassments will serve as an excuse, and Mrs. Grahame can readily find a pretext for remaining behind. The place is gloomy as a tomb, the rooms closed, the furniture in swaddling-clothes, the whole neighborhood changed, all of her old acquaintances gone. She will be ready to accept the alternative in less than a month, or, if not, we can take a clergyman down to read the marriage-ceremony over us, and she will be my wife fast as though no coy spirit on her part had given trouble."

A gray shade crept into Richard Grahame's face. He understood plainly as if Dare had said it, that the last alternative was the intention he had marked from the first.

"You couldn't do it," he said. "No clergyman would, in this day."

"The Reverend Arthur Grattis' would. He wants my influence in procuring him a city call. All I ask of you is to back me in the business at Thornhurst. Will you do it?"

Two months' extension of his bills and fifty thousand dollars on their marriage-day were in Richard Grahame's mind. He liked Nora in a way; he rather shrank from the thought of losing her respect, but—

He looked up to find Dare's eyes upon him.

"I haven't any choice," he said, almost sullenly. "I don't like the business, but I'll do what you've asked of me in return for what you've promised."

CHAPTER XXV.

SUCH A WELCOME HOME!

MR. GRAHAME himself found time for a run down to the coast, a week after Dare's unsuccessful mission there. There was a consultation between the two head powers, and afterward Nora was called to an interview with her guardian. He stood in a stiff, constrained fashion, his hands crossed upon his back, looking excessively uncomfortable and uncertain how to open his subject. He was a man of few words, however, not given to beating about the bush, and he broached his point without delay.

"I have just been talking with Mrs. Grahame, Nora, and we are obliged at last to take you into family confidence. I am finding myself in such straightened circumstances of late that it is absolutely necessary to close all drains for a time. We cannot open our town establishment as heretofore. My own proposition was to return there and remain in quietude, but my wife suggested a more suitable arrangement for herself. Unless you object to being left, she has concluded to accept an invitation from the Vandiveres to make one of their party for a late trip to the mountains and the lakes. For you, if you can content yourself meanwhile, I can think of nothing better than Thornhurst—that is, if you still hold to your ridiculous idea of beggarizing yourself for a fancy. If you will consent to draw upon your own income ahead of the mere sum set aside, which is all exhausted now, of course there will be no need of banishing you from society."

"I shall go to Thornhurst," Nora answered, decisively. "I have no idea of changing my intention, Mr. Grahame. As soon as I am of age I shall make over everything to the proper heir. I am not sure that I shall even object to a few months' seclusion."

"To your own taste, my dear. It would be useless to offer objections, I presume. Now, when can you be ready to leave here?"

He drew out his watch and consulted it, anxious to end the interview.

"In a couple of hours if you like."

"To-morrow morning will answer. I shall accompany you to Thornhurst, of course. You will probably find it tiresome there, but since it is your own choice I have nothing more to say."

He hardly breathed freely until she was out of his presence again. This was by no means the part Mr. Grahame would have preferred taking, but his conscience was not sufficiently tender to trouble him much after he had fairly enlisted in his share of the undertaking.

The lady chaperone neither chagrined nor uttered a sound of protest.

"Going to Thornhurst. Nora—positively going alone to Thornhurst! Indeed, if you are determined I cannot permit that. I shall, it's up to my own hands and go back with you. Thornhurst will be dreary as a desert, musty and dreary after spending two years unoccupied. Do pray, for the love of—

over your fanatical inclinations, my dear. I shall have no patience with you left if you insist upon isolating yourself in that absurd fashion; you should not do it if my authority availed for anything."

"Don't let us quarrel over it, at least. You always did view me as irreconcilable. I have quite made up my mind to go to Thornhurst, but you shall not alter one arrangement of your own. I will not hear to that. If I make my own choice it is no reason you should suffer the consequences."

And to all further remonstrances Nora was firm; the law of the Medes and Persians was never more fixed than she in her intention to restore the moneys and estates left away from Vane Vivian, and the present issue could be but a commencement of her sacrifice.

She went with her guardian to Thornhurst the next day. Dare had taken a flying trip there, and the result was that the interior of the mansion was at its gloomiest. The ranges of lofty spacious rooms that had been so pleasant in Colonel Vivian's time were closed. Shutters were up at every window of the house except in the rear where the few servants left in charge held forth. The grounds and the shrubbery were in order, but the whole place was desolate, and the wind swept through the cedar grove with the mournful plaint which she never heard now without a shudder.

The housekeeper appeared to meet them, not the Mrs. Ford of olden time, but a hard-visaged, angular woman, with an uncompromising demeanor, and black glittering eyes which if they had no evil power certainly never softened to bestow any particular good in a glance.

"You will be left for the time in charge of Mrs. Bennett, my dear," said Nora's guardian, as they followed into the morning-room, which that august person unlocked and threw open. "I shall take occasion to run down in the course of another week and see how you are getting on. Meantime, if you repent your hasty, and I must consider it unwise decision, you have only to drop me a line."

"I never shall repent it," she asserted, positively. "And remember, guardian, when Sir Rupert comes, you are to bring him down here without fail. I did not write because he must be well on his way long before this."

They had luncheon together, and almost immediately afterward Mr. Grahame took his departure. Late on the following day he sat in his counting-room, Owen Dare in an opposite place, discussing in detail the plan which the latter had fully laid out.

"How in reason you expect to coerce her when she once learns why she was sent there is more than I can understand, Dare. Deserted as the neighborhood is you can't very well lock her up there and station a jailer at her door; while it is like the girl to walk out of the house, shake the dust off her feet, and begin the new kind of life she proposes for by-and-by, music-teaching, governessing, or something of that sort. She's sure to find some way for herself, too, by George! She's not one of your namby-pamby women to be put down by the first little discouragement. She's equal to taking the matter in her own hands and raising popular sympathy for herself if you press her too hard. Now that the bird is caged for you, how are you going to keep her caged is what I want to know?"

"Bolts and bars would never suffice," answered Dare, with a laugh. "I can trust more safely to her own obstinate will. When she once learns the stand you will take I don't suppose a kingdom would induce her to step beneath your roof again. She has no friends to whom she would care to go in such a crisis. Take my word for it, no temptation will persuade her from Thornhurst until she renounces her right legally—which I propose she shall not do. The baronet must be kept away from her, but that will not be a difficult matter; likewise all other officious friends. Let her grow well disgusted with her choice of location; then go down with me for a week; let me plead my own suit persistently as I may; let me convince her that I am not to be shaken off; and, if all fails, there is the last alternative I mentioned the other day. The time is not very long, but it is long enough. Nora Carteret must be my wife before she is twenty-one."

It promised to be an exciting contest, Mr. Grahame thought. The clashing of those two strong wills, one deep and subtle, the other frank but unwavering, must be a battle fought and hardly won. Any other man but Dare might have given up the task at the very first, but what mere woman's strength could resist his cold-blooded, crafty skill?

While they still sat there, a knock fell upon a panel of the door, and an under-clerk put his head inside. A person wished very particularly to see Mr. Grahame—no name. Should he show him in?

"Show him in," said Dare, in an aside. "I presume you are not afraid of a creditor, Grahame, since your time is extended."

The other nodded to the clerk, who ushered in a stranger, a moment later—a sturdy, thickset man, bronzed by much exposure, wearing a beard half a yard long, a trifle rough and abrupt in his manner of act and speech. The merchant rose and placed a chair.

"If your business is with me," he said, observing the other's doubtful glance toward Dare, "you may speak without reserve. What name, may I ask?"

"Prescott; you'll not know me by it, however. I am just arrived from Rio Janeiro, lately from the diamond mines of Brazil. You don't hear so much of them in this day of South African excitement. I am not here to talk about myself, but a Miss Lenore Carteret, who, I am informed, is under your guardianship at present."

"Miss Carteret is my ward," assented the merchant, wondringly.

"I am here for the purpose of offering Miss Car-

teret two hundred thousand dollars for her share in the Brazilian mines. I have the papers signifying her right in my possession. I propose leaving them for your examination now, and calling another time for the decision. I shall wish to see Miss Carteret herself before any bargain is concluded. I was a friend of her father, and he left those documents with me over five years ago, just before his death. They were not worth the paper in them then. I am supplied with references, and will give you the addresses of Rio Janeiro firms, if you wish to satisfy yourself regarding the market value of the claims."

The stranger was a man of deeds as well as words, as evinced by his immediate production of a notebook, on a blank leaf of which he wrote the addresses of a couple of banking-firms, tearing out and presenting it, along with testimonials of his own responsibility. The silence of a moment, broken by the rapid scratching of his pencil, had reigned in the counting-room. Astonishment held the other two spellbound, but Mr. Grahame, with the substantial testimony of the papers touching his hand, rallied.

"Upon my word, this is wonderful news. Like an Arabian Nights' tale, for all the world. You are a stranger in the city, I presume, Mr. Prescott. Can I not prevail upon you to accept my hospitality, though as it chances my ward is now out of town? My wife has but just returned, and she will do her best to make your stay pleasant."

"Thanks for the kindness of your invitation, but I shall leave the city by to-night's train. I am on the way with a comrade, and I have sorrowful news for him, poor fellow. Very probably you may know him, sir; his name is Vane Vivian."

"Vane Vivian!" echoed Mr. Grahame, aghast. Dare started, and sunk his teeth into his under lip to control the tremor which agitated him.

"I have just heard that his father is dead, and Vivian is not yet aware of the fact. I am to meet him at the depot in time for the 6:30 train. Perhaps you can give me fuller particulars than I learned; truth to tell, I was too shocked for the moment to ask questions, or to think that he would wish to know."

Owen Dare shot a quick glance at the merchant. He was pale to his lips, and with a muttered apology rose hastily and went out, leaving the two alone.

"Will you tell me what you heard regarding the matter, Mr. Prescott?"

"It was at the lawyer's. Vivian gave me the address, and I went there to make inquiry about Miss Carteret's present whereabouts. I was simply informed that Colonel Vivian was dead, given your address, and referred here. This news will be a sad shock to my comrade, Mr. Grahame."

"Great heavens!" cried the merchant, starting to his feet excitedly. "What does the rash fellow mean by coming back? Why, man alive, don't you know that Colonel Vivian was murdered New Year's Eve, three years ago, and that Vane Vivian is accused of the crime? Who would have dreamed that, after baffling the law this long, he would run deliberately into such horrible danger as this?"

"Vane Vivian accused of murder!" cried Prescott, incredulously. "It's preposterous! He wouldn't willingly hurt a fly. I tell you he does not even know of his father's death."

"Your thinking so doesn't alter the fact. He will be hung for the murder as surely as he is caught here. I wouldn't lift my hand to cheat the law, but for the sake of the old family name—I'm distantly connected with the family by marriage myself—I hoped he would never turn up. It's most unfortunate, most foolhardy! The evidence against him is too strong to be broken."

"Vane Vivian is never the man to have done a murder," said Prescott, rising. "I'd stake my soul on that. It's absurd to be even thought of. I've been with him now two years, and I'll swear there's nothing criminal hanging about him. It's a terrible mistake, and he'll have it cleared up, take my word for it."

"I trust he may, but if you knew the facts well as I do, you would not be hopeful."

"I am going now to be on the look-out for him. If you are his friend, you will come along and tell him what you know of this horrible accusation."

For one instant Richard Grahame hesitated. He had a morbid dread at prospect of being drawn into a criminal case in any capacity, while his own remote connection with the young man prompted him to favor any chance of escape which might remain. Possibly the strong partisanship of this wealthy miner was not without its effect. He took his hat from its place, and, with a brief assent, went along.

The usual crowd clogged the doors of the waiting-room, and one man standing a little apart gave a sharp look at the two as they passed. They pushed their way through, and stood in the less-thronged space within.

"He is not here yet," said Prescott, with a glance about. "He will be shortly, though; no temptation would induce him to miss the train." He stood looking out of the window at the shifting throng, somewhat troubled in his mind, but less seriously than he would have been had he known the whole array of dark appearances to be brought against his friend.

A half-hour dragged away while they waited. Prescott stirred and glanced up at a little clock ticking against the wall at last. It was twenty-five minutes after six. He did not speak, but again turned his glance to the platform without.

At the same moment a tall form was coming with swift regular strides down the street. The same man who had been lounging a little apart from the crowd for this last half-hour fixed him with a glance, and stepped forward a pace.

"Mr. Vane Vivian?" he said, inquiringly.

"That is my name."

"I have business with you, sir."

"Then I must trouble you to cut it short or to defer it altogether for the present time. Pardon, but I have not recognized you, and I have no more than easy time to reach the train."

"I must trouble you to defer the trip, Mr. Vivian." With a motion of his hand he threw back the lapel of his coat and disclosed the badge of the detective force. "I am obliged to officiate in a most unpleasant duty. I am sorry to be the cause of your inconvenience and delay. I arrest you in the name of the law." His hand was laid on Vane's shoulder, there was an unpleasant earnestness about his speech denoting that this was no jest, but the younger man turned an incredulous face upon him.

"You have mistaken me for some one else, I think. I came on shore from a three years' absence scarcely four hours ago. If I am detained one minute more I will lose my train. Is this absurd charge so important you cannot take my word and let me off?"

"There is no mistake," said the officer, calmly. "I arrest you for the murder of your father, Colonel Seymour Vivian, at midnight of New Year's eve, 1859."

"My father!" Every trace of color faded from Vane's face. He stood like one turned to stone, a heavy stillness clogging his heart, scarcely a pulse stirring for one awful moment.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A HEART'S CRY!

DURING that moment the two men from within the waiting-room came hurrying out, Prescott in advance, his swarthy face plainly expressing his perturbed state of mind. He put out his hand and grasped Vane's with a strong pressure.

"My poor boy! has it come upon you already? I hoped to have seen you first to break this terrible news."

"It can't be possible, Prescott. This person tells me—great heavens!—that my father was murdered the very night I left him, almost three years ago. Dead all this time, and I not forgiven!"

The despair in his face wrung the heart of the comrade who had grown to love him as a younger brother. The officer was stolid, and the merchant standing a little back only anxious to escape attention.

"It is terrible, the disappointment and the shock," said Prescott, in deep sympathy. "Are you—" he glanced at the officer hesitating.

"Under arrest for the crime—yes." Vane was very pale, but perfectly collected as the full force of his present position struck him. "What a welcome home, my friend!"

"But, good Lord! Vivian, you don't take this accusation as a serious thing? Surely you can clear yourself? Can't you rid yourself of suspicion in a single hearing, without the publicity of a trial? Stay; here is an old friend of yours who may be able to throw light upon whatever is dark to you."

"Mr. Grahame," said Vane, observing him for the first. "You must know the particulars of my father's terrible fate. Heaven knows, I would have died myself rather than harm should have come to him."

During the brief space they had been standing there an incoming train had shrieked at the opposite side of the depot-building, disgorged its passengers and rushed on its way again. One among those newly arrived pushed forward to claim his baggage and give directions regarding it; then, following in the wake of the steady stream, came out through the gate and upon the little group drawn out of the way of the passers-by. He stopped short for an instant, but after one amazed glance strode forward into their midst.

"Vivian, my dear fellow, what does this mean? Odd, that after looking for you over half the world, you are the first man I meet on my return."

"A fortunate chance has surely sent you, Sir Rupert," answered Vane, yielding his hand to the other's hearty grasp. "You were always my friend in trouble, but merciful heavens! that I should have to call on you in trouble like this. I am under arrest for my father's murder. How and where did it occur? why am I accused?"

The officer put in a word at that.

"There'll be other chances of explanation; we are drawing attention. You'll be taken on by the first train to-morrow; for to-night, if you'll give me your word of honor not to attempt an escape you can go to a hotel in company with these gentlemen if they wish. You'll be under surveillance, of course, but that need not be made apparent if nothing suspicious transpires."

"I give you my word to attempt no escape," said Vane, adding hurriedly, as the officer signaled a carriage: "Sir Rupert Archer, let me present a true friend of mine, Mr. Prescott. I need not ask if you two will see me through the result."

Brief recognitions were exchanged, Sir Rupert spoke a word to the merchant, who was turning away, and followed into the carriage. The officer mounted beside the driver, and the vehicle rolled away.

"You ask for particulars," said the baronet, on the way. "Is it possible you never heard? Your father was murdered, shot dead, at midnight of that New Year's eve you were last at Thornhurst. Can you account for yourself at that time, Vane?"

At midnight! Like a vivid picture the remembrance of that time rose up in his mind, the avenue gates, the fitful moonlight upon the snow, the dark-robed female form, the dull desperation in his heart, the clear, vibrating strokes as they clef the air!

"I can account for myself, but, oh! Sir Rupert, that will not give me back my father." His voice broke, the silent pressure of his friend's hand was better sympathy than words.

"Your first duty is to yourself now," said the baronet, after a moment. "You will be taken on

and probably have a hearing, immediately after your arrival. Let me secure your proof and escape a trial if possible. Can you prove an *alibi*?"

"By Miss Montrose. I met her at the gates as I went out that night, and we stood there together as the clock struck midnight. I left her there when I ran, as I had to do to catch the train."

"Of course you saw others immediately afterward," said Sir Rupert, anxiously. "Some one or the way, at least the people at the station?"

"Not one; I had no time. I sprung to the platform after the cars were in motion. Miss Montrose was the last person of all my old acquaintances I ever saw until this day. I did not even get the papers for months afterward. I never heard one word from home—my own fault, but I had an object."

A cold fear stole over the baronet. His friend's life hung on the testimony of Miss Montrose, and Miss Montrose had disappeared within twelve hours following that meeting, almost as suddenly, almost as mysteriously, and later quite as wholly, as Vane himself.

The merchant found Dare awaiting him on his return.

"That news this afternoon quite startled me," he said, apologetically. "Is it a positive fact that Vane has ventured back? I can scarcely credit it in my own cool senses."

"Back and taken already. He was arrested at the depot, and will be taken on to-morrow. If facts were not so strong against him, I could almost believe him innocent."

"You forget how skilled in deception he is. I haven't a doubt of his guilt or a hope of the result, but it's a terrible calamity that he should turn up. I want to speak of the other matter, however—regarding Nora. The events of this day must change our plans materially."

"You will be in luck if you carry them out, Dare. Two fortunes that will aggregate a million. The diamond mine affair is an unparalleled streak of fortune. It will not make your undertaking any the easier, I predict."

"It shall not have the opportunity of making it harder. We must hasten matters. Nora must not hear a breath of that or of Vane's return until she is my wife. I shall go down to Thornhurst to-morrow, Mr. Grahame, before either the papers or any private hint has reached her. You must come along and avow yourself unconditionally in my favor. There must be no hesitation now, on your part or on mine, and no time lost in gaining our point. I shall drop a note to Reverend Grattis to-night to join us at the village within the next three days. I can depend on him and on you."

"On me certainly, Dare! I did not approve the affair from the start, but I am in for it, and I am not one to forget the service you have been to me."

"Where has Vivian been all this time?" asked Dare, abruptly. "What account does he give of him?"

"He is straight from Brazil, was in partnership with Prescott there, I take it. He has made money, too, the miner says; it is probably that has brought him back. Strange that the officers should have got hold of him so soon."

Dare might have explained the fact had he chosen, since a word from him had given the alarm.

Three days at Thornhurst mansion went tediously by. It was dreary beyond all expression. Even Nora's bright, healthy spirits already suffered from the contrast to her late gay career. Three depressing days, during which she had seen and spoken to no mortal save the stiff, hard-faced housekeeper, the no less stiff footman, and the old deaf gardener, the sole remaining relic in the small retinue of the colonel's time, gave a different aspect to the seclusion which had not seemed forbidding of itself. The old brown house beyond the cedar grove was fast falling into a ruin; of the families who had formed a social circle in the vicinity three years before, all were scattered. Mr. Telford of the village was away on an indefinite tour with his pretty bride, the Miss Gray of that momentous Christmas-time association. The change was as great as from tropical splendor to Arctic barrenness and monotony.

It was late afternoon of the fourth day after her arrival, and Nora was out upon a long walk, the only relief she found. It was a raw, chilly, cloudy day, but she never minded adverse weather. She came homeward through the evening gray with weary steps, with an oppression which she charged to the heavy atmosphere and dull surroundings weighing upon her. A man's form leaned against the gate-post, a man's eye watched her advance with a strong, fierce gleam, quickly suppressed, as hat in hand he opened the gate. Her first intimation of his presence came when she glanced up to find her self face to face with Owen Dare.

She bowed and was passing on without observing the hand he put out, but he turned quickly to join her with reproachful solicitude.

"It is a miserable day to be out, Nora, with this damp breeze. Aren't you going to give me a welcome to your own home?"

"Not mine, Mr. Dare; you know I never have considered it so. I can only wonder you should ever care to revive such memories as this place must bring to you." What was there in those straightforward brown eyes looking upon him, to discompose his usually steady nerves, to send his own glance wandering, to bring that cruel gleam into his eyes again, to mark hard lines about his thin, compressed lips—what? The change was for only an instant, but it had not escaped Nora, and a doubt which she had put away more than once as an injustice not to be harbored in her thoughts faintly stirred. Had he any knowledge of the assassin who had done his dark work so securely, with such crafty malice throwing suspicion upon one

whom the strongest circumstantial evidence had never induced her to believe other than innocent? She was too just to accuse Dare even in her own mind of having been accessory to the deed, but her previous distrust of him had settled into a deeply-rooted aversion she had not tried to conquer. The swift change went over his face and was gone in a single second of time.

"How can it bring me anything but grateful remembrances? I had little claim upon its last owner, but he was exceedingly generous toward me. It was here, too, that I discovered the spell which one pair of bright eyes had thrown around me, which all your cruelty, Nora, has never broken."

"Mr. Dare!" She flashed about upon him with an indignant flush burning in her cheeks. "This is an interdicted subject between us. Why will you not understand that any reference to it is at once most distasteful and perfectly useless? There is a limit where patience ceases to be a virtue, and I arrived at it ten days ago. I can find no excuse for this resumption of a question which was settled beyond mistaking then. I shall not fail to speak to Mr. Grahame when he comes down in guarding against like annoyances in the future."

"Your guardian came down with me, Miss Carteret. I hoped to find you in a more compliant frame of mind after experiencing the solitude here. I came for the purpose of renewing my previous offer, of giving you one more chance to escape the fate you would bring upon yourself."

She was walking swiftly toward the mansion now, in a silence that was not broken, as he apparently waited a reply. He strode in advance a pace and confronted her as they reached the wide flight of steps leading to the entrance-door, put forth his hand and clutched her wrist, when she would have passed, with a pressure like a tight, snaky coil.

"You choose to treat me with contempt, Miss Carteret. You have never taken any pains to conceal your disdain. You have treated me cruelly as you would not have done the most abject slave in creation, but because I have been your unresisting slave is no reason why I may not yet become your master. It is a long time since I first swore to myself that you should yet be my wife, and I am not the man to break my oaths when my soul is in them. I declare to you now that you shall be mine, peaceably and by fair means if you will, if not in spite of all resistance of yours, and by a less gentle way than I should prefer to use. Once more, Nora, will you listen to love instead of power; will you give me the favorable answer which you shall give sooner or later, willing or unwilling?"

She saw the demon looking out of his eyes, and a pang of fear, such as had never assailed her in all her life before, shot to her heart. It carried every particle of color from her face, more than ever marble-like in the fading light, but she neither shrunk nor cowered under the cold horror come upon her. She looked scornfully back into those pitiless eyes.

"Once more, Mr. Dare, if you and I were the only two persons on earth, my answer would still be the same. No power on earth can avail to alter it."

"Don't be too sure of that. If I were driven to it, I would hunt you to the ends of the earth rather than let you escape me now. I am not driven to it, and you have chosen for yourself what my course toward you shall be. You force me to the use of harsh measures, and I shall not hesitate to avail myself of them. Come in, Miss Carteret, and take your guardian's opinion of the matter."

He sprung up the steps and threw open the door for her. Lights were gleaming in the little parlor where Mr. Grahame awaited them; a genial blaze was upon the hearth, an air of more general comfort prevailed than had of late reigned at Thornhurst. Nora swept into his presence, her white, intense face calm through great excitement, telling him the story at a glance. Dare followed and turned the key in the door as he closed it.

"Mr. Grahame, I ask you to protect me from such insults as that man has just now put upon me. You have control here, for the present time, and I demand that you shall deny him admittance to the house so long as I remain."

"Miss Carteret is a trifle excited and scarcely responsible for the demand," said Dare, coolly, sauntering forward to face them both, and resting his elbow upon the mantle. "Will you be kind enough to place a chair for your ward, Mr. Grahame, and assure her of your approbation of the proposal I have already had the pleasure of making to you?"

Nora declined the proffered seat with a gesture, her eyes fixed in silent questioning upon her guardian's face.

"Dare certainly has my sanction, Nora. I must beg that you will consider again and more favorably in regard to him."

"I have rejected Mr. Dare's suit finally and irreversibly, sir. He has insulted me, first by his pertinacity, and afterward by making ungentlemanly threats when I repeated my decision."

"I have assured Miss Carteret that she shall be my wife, willing or unwilling, by means fair or unfair. She will doubtless wish to appeal for your protection on that basis."

The sneer in his voice stung her, but her gaze did not waver from her guardian's face.

It was a trying position to Mr. Grahame, but Dare's presence kept him firmly to the mark.

"If you are persistent in refusing what is to your own interest, my dear, we must consult that interest for you," he answered with dignity. "Dare is suited to you in all respects; I approve of him as your future husband; and I beg you may not occasion trouble by holding to some absurd prejudice of your own."

"Do you mean, sir, that you have leagued yourself with him? Is this keeping the trust Colonel Vivian reposed in you? I cannot escape persecu-

tion, if you countenance it, but if your control over my actions extended for years instead of a few weeks yet, if you employed years in attempting to coerce me in a matter like this, you would never succeed."

A dark red flush crept up the merchant's brow. Like many another unreasonable man, knowing himself in the wrong, he went into a passion to cover his confusion.

"You shall give what you have never been particular in according me—obedience," he declared, angrily. "Make up your mind to what is inevitable, Miss Carteret. Dare shall be your husband, and that within this very week, if only for the purpose of preventing you from scattering Colonel Vivian's bequest to the winds. No girl in her senses would act as you have proposed. My trust will not permit me to sanction such folly."

Nora's lips compressed in a firm straight line, her eyes had in them the look of a hunted creature turned at bay, but she did not speak a word.

"It is unpleasant for a lady to retract her word," said Dare, bowing in mock politeness toward her. "I shall not ask Miss Carteret to do so. But I shall expect her to receive me with the deference a bride should extend toward her intended when I come with the clergyman at this hour to-morrow. I appreciate the truth of the saying 'there's many a slip,' etc., too fully to risk unnecessary delay. It has come my time to make demands now, Nora. Be assured that I shall never plead again."

The brown indignant eyes blazed upon him.

"I should deny you at the very altar. What do you suppose me to be that you think I would have any measure forced upon me, much less a step like that which would compromise all my life? If any fraud or any unjust power could force me to really become your wife, I would defy you afterward and throw off your claim. It cannot be done, for you can never wring my consent."

"My friend the clergyman will dispense with that," said Dare, coolly. "Afterward the law gives the husband control of his wife, and there are private institutions provided for just such violent and unconquerable forms of mania as yours, my dear Nora. The subject is hardly a pleasant one, and if you please we will drop it here."

"And that is the dinner-bell," said Mr. Grahame, rising. "We will wait while you put off your wraps, Nora."

"Thanks; I do not wish dinner."

"You had better come, my dear. Even sentiment cannot exist without a substance."

"You will please hold me excused, sir, now and for the remainder of the evening."

"In that case," said Dare. "let me make my adieux. I shall go back to the village for the night. I can leave you safely in such excellent care as your guardian will extend."

He bowed but did not offer his hand, unlocked the door and held it wide for her. She swept out with the stateliness of an injured queen, but up in her own room where a dim light was burning, with the bolt slipped home, she fell on her knees by the bed and buried her face in the covering, a silent motionless form as long minutes went by.

She had never felt her desolation so completely before. They would never dare to put their threats into execution; they could not do it if they had the will; they were trying to frighten her into submission—and the proud lips curled, the heart swelled in bitter defiance, but under all was a feeling of utter loneliness, of isolation from all close sympathy upon the earth.

Bright stars were shining out of an opal-clear sky when she lifted her face, changed and worn in this little time. She crossed the floor, throwing a window wide, and leaning out to catch the breeze upon her brow. Did it bring to her a message from some far-away point of the wide world where she might fancy a weary wanderer straying?

Her hands went up to clasp her forehead; the firm lips quivered and parted, and through the proud-pained heart thrilled the cry which no breath uttered, which was of itself a revelation she had crushed from her own recognition through the long years:

"Oh, Vane, Vane!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TURNING OF THE SCALE.

NORA came down to breakfast next morning, pallid and with purple shades under her eyes, traces of a sleepless, restless night.

"I am half-convinced that Dare is right," thought Mr. Grahame from his place as he glanced at her. "Solitude and fifteen hours' fasting have a great effect in subduing a wilful spirit. She evidently sees that we mean all we say, and wisely concludes not to make idle resistance."

The merchant sunk into a more complacent frame of mind after that. The very quietude which lulled his apprehension was indicative of anything but the submissive spirit to which he ascribed it. It was a very silent meal, a very dull morning which followed it. Nora retired to her own room again, and Mr. Grahame yawned and dozed through a long three hours. Without the chill and clouds of the last three days had resolved into a slow drizzle, and the first falling leaves from the elms were swept into wet, shivering drifts here and there on the close turf of the lawn. It was not an inviting prospect as he stood in the door looking out, but the empty rooms in the great houses were no more so.

"No fear of chance callers on a day like this," he reflected, as he tossed the stub of the cigar he had been smoking to the damp path. "The servants have their orders in case any one should stray this way. By Jove! little wonder that Nora is ready to give in. I think I'll walk across and see what Dare is doing with himself."

His overcoat was on the rack, an umbrella near at

hand, and Mr. Grahame well used to all weathers. Three minutes afterward he was taking the path across the fields the only moving creature to be seen in the whole dripping, sodden landscape. Nora caught a glimpse of him from her window, and pressed her face against the glass watching him disappear within the cedar-grove, thinking intently for a moment. There were two of them; they were strong and she was weak; dare she knew would hesitate at nothing to carry his point, and while her guardian would surely not dare resort to the extremity they had declared the previous night, she would be subject to like indignities and persecutions while they remained. She was alone there, but would she be any less alone anywhere else, back in the city, for instance, or any the less in their power? Mrs. Grahame was most probably up among the lakes of Central New York now, and to what one of her fashionable, propriety-serving acquaintances could she appeal from the control of her guardian? Surely the thought which had come like a wild impulse into her head of flying from them back to the city was not one to be feasibly carried out.

She dismissed it and was turning away when a second moving object caught her eye. This time it was a carriage, one of the shabby vehicles belonging to the village, dashing through the gates and up the drive to the front of the building. A summons echoed through the quiet house, a moment later. There was a little delay, and Nora went out to the head of the stairs with but a faint hope that this arrival might change her own situation there for the better. It was more apt to prove an humble visitor for the housekeeper than one of her own class.

"Can't 'elp hit," the footman was saying, as he blocked the entrance with his form. "My horder was to let nobody hin, and hi'm not going to break 'em. Wouldn't do hit for Queen Victory 'erself, with my hinstructions." Something of the cockney had been brought over with this importation from Old England, and a full complement of John Bull obstinacy was planted under that stolid exterior.

"My fare's come all the way from New York to see the young lady that's stayin' here," said a rough, expostulating voice without. "Come now, lend a hand here and help get the lady in."

"There hain't no young lady 'ere," declared the man at the door, with a *sangfroid* which astonished his listener.

"Oh, come now, that won't go down! Haven't I seen her myself a couple of times on the road?"

"Can't 'elp hit. My horders was to say has there's no young lady 'ere to hanyone."

"Stand aside, Hamlin," said Nora's authoritative voice at his back. "What do you mean by denying admittance to any guest?"

"Hit's my horders, miss, hon pain hof being discharged. Begging your pardon, miss, nobody can't come hin half the same."

"At least your orders cannot prevent me from going out. Stand aside at once."

Hamlin obeyed, unwillingly, and Nora ran down the steps to the waiting carriage. Within sat Mrs. Sholto Norton Hayes, the picture of virtuous indignation, not inclined to unbend after this slight put upon her.

"My dear Mrs. Hayes, this is some ridiculous mistake," said Nora, for once heartily rejoiced at sight of her rival of old. "Don't mind it, please, and do get out at once."

"Thanks; I have altered my purpose," answered the lady, frigidly. "I shall return to the village. Are you aware that it rains, Miss Carteret? It is exceedingly imprudent for a young lady in your delicate health to be out in it."

"But I am not in delicate health, Mrs. Hayes. I thought you knew how preposterously healthy I always am. Do, for my sake, overlook the servant's stupid blunder."

"Who ordered him to keep me out?" asked Mrs. Hayes, aggrievedly. "Really, Nora, I do not understand your course at all. Why did you leave word for Sir Rupert Archer that you were off on a late trip to the lakes on account of impaired health?"

"I never left such word."

"I heard Lisa Grahame herself tell him so. And Vane—dear me, Nora! after the way you have stood for Vane I should not suppose you would be so callous to his fate now."

Nora's heart gave a great bound, for a moment her breath and her words refused to come.

"What of Vane?" she asked, when she could speak, breathlessly. "Have you heard of him?"

"All the country is hearing of him," vouchsafed Mrs. Hayes, still stiffly. "Do you never read the papers that you don't know he is under arrest? He was taken three days ago, immediately after landing, and brought on to Pittsburg the day following. There's just one chance for him, people say, and that is to prove an *alibi*. I'm sure I hope he may."

Nora's heart was standing still now. The earth and heaven seemed to meet and mingle for one dizzy confused moment. A rush of comprehension also came. She had been purposely kept in ignorance of this, and Vane's return had fixed the league between her guardian and Owen Darc.

"I never heard of it," she said, in low, intense tones. "Mrs. Hayes, you will not refuse to come in when I tell you so and that I need you here?"

The white, wistful face was not to be resisted. Mrs. Hayes, with her injured dignity in a measure appeased, consented to alight at last. The uncompromising warden of the door had retired minutes before in disgust, and the way was free.

"I don't know what you mean by needing me, my dear," she said, more graciously. "If you really need any one why not send a message to Sholto? He came on with me to be present at the hearing which occurs to-day. This driver has proved himself a most accomodating person, and we can safely trust him to send a dispatch."

For once in her life at least Mrs. Hayes had made a sensible suggestion, and one which Nora put into immediate execution. She wrote the message hurriedly in the other's name, and herself gave it in charge to the good-natured waiting driver, who declined the gratuity she would have pressed upon him.

"Bless you, no, miss, not for a trifle like that. I've had my fare, and it's a pleasure to do for them that were ever anything to Colonel Vivian. The old colonel was a good friend to poor folk about always."

"And now," said Mrs. Hayes, as the two were seated together, a little later, in the one open parlor, "what is the mystery of your being here, Nora? I discovered the fact by the merest accident. I thought with all the rest that you were up among the lakes, but a chance letter from Ida Vandivere mentioned your odd taste in coming alone to Thornhurst. If you had to come why wasn't Lisa Grahame along instead of going back to town?"

"It was Mrs. Grahame who was to take the trip to the lakes. I came here at my guardian's suggestion. There, Mrs. Hayes, I was inclined to make you only half a confidante, but I repent already and tell you the whole story."

She told it briefly, a new anxiety of more weight than any previous uneasiness she had entertained for herself upon her. Mrs. Hayes who had never quite forgiven Owen Dare, was willing enough to remain now and by her presence baffle his plans.

"Such unparalleled effrontery!" she ejaculated. "With Sir Rupert Archer and a half score of other friends only twenty miles away, to think they should have you hidden here and absolutely make the attempt to force you into a marriage against your own will—it is out of all precedent! It is only natural that you do not wish the matter made public talk, and I shall respect your request by not mentioning it even to Sholto. How fortunate we sent for him, since he is the other trustee, and will see that you have your own way regarding Thornhurst."

It proved a long hour of mutual explanations between the two. Nora heard for the first of her own unexpected fortune, of the rumors of Vane's success in the diamond fields, of popular sympathy turned suddenly in his favor.

"Half the people are confident that he will turn out innocent at last," concluded the lady. "Some say that he can prove an *alibi* at the very start, and so escape a trial. I am sure I hope so. Think what a terrible disgrace it would be to have a crime like that attach to the old Vivian name!"

Two hours after he had sauntered out alone, Mr. Grahame returned arm-in-arm with Dare. The two stopped, transfixed, upon the threshold—transfixed at sight of Mrs. Sholto Norton Hayes reclining in a great purple velvet chair before the fire, greeting them with her most languid, softest words and smiles.

Nora rose up, a bright flush in her cheeks, a little triumphant thrill in her voice, which came there in this supreme moment of her own victory over the machinations against her as she noted the blank, baffled expression sweep over Dare's face.

"Mrs. Hayes has kindly brought me the news which you gentlemen withheld," she said. "In return, I had the pleasure of confiding to her all of yesterday's incidents, and at my request she has consented to remain at Thornhurst for an indefinite time. Mr. Hayes, in Pittsburg now, may be expected by the evening train. I think I may depend upon his assistance in carrying out my intention when I come of age, without fear of the private lunatic asylum of which Mr. Dare made mention last night."

Dare, with a look of baffled malignity, impotent of harm as was his own dark will now, turned on his heel and strode out of the house without a word.

"Whether you absolutely meant all you said, or merely endeavored to frighten me into compliance with your will," Nora continued, addressing her guardian, "I do not ask. You never would have succeeded in either case. It rests with you whether the affair shall ever come to public knowledge. I am willing to let matters rest as they were for the few weeks I shall still remain under your guardianship, Mr. Grahame, provided you do not attempt again to influence my inclination."

Mr. Grahame drew a breath of absolute relief.

"It shall be as you say, Nora. Of myself, I never would have attempted to influence you. I never really favored the scheme, but I was bound to support Dare in all reasonable measures. Of course I would not have sanctioned his going to the extremes proposed."

Nora was willing to accept the assurance, and peace was established again in Thornhurst. Sholto Norton Hayes, in company with two other gentlemen, arrived by the 6:30 express. The Thornhurst carriage met them, and they were whirled up through the dripping avenue and set down before the lighted front in the murky dusk of the chill autumn evening. Already Thornhurst mansion had thrown off the cloud of dreariness which had encompassed it. The long parlors were unclosed, the furniture divested of the canvas coverings, cheery fires upon the hearths, and lights penetrating all the corners.

Nora had been hopeful, feverishly expectant, during the afternoon. With the feet of the comers on the very threshold, a shivering dread came over her, at once an intense desire to know the result urging her forward, a terrible fear of the worst holding her back. Mrs. Hayes was in her own chamber, dressing for dinner. The fate of the world might have hung on a thread, but Mrs. Sholto Hayes would not have been shaken from her observances of long habit—Gabriel might have sounded his trump almost any day after six with the certainty of finding her ready for eternity in full toilet. On this occasion the excitement attending her arrival and the absence of

her maid had shaken her weak nerves and prolonged the task of dressing by a good hour. Nora stood alone in the center of the rooms, listening to her guardian's greeting of the guests and the sounds of their steps passing up the stairway to the apartments designed for them. The long half-hour of suspense seemed intolerable in prospect. She was not to be kept in suspense, however. The door swung back, and Sir Rupert Archer, still in traveling-wraps, had her hand in his in another moment.

"I knew how anxious you would be to know the result of the hearing to-day, and I thought you would rather have it from friendly lips." His grave face crushed her last hope.

"Vane has not been cleared!"

"He is committed for trial. Don't let it alarm you. He had no hope of escaping a trial himself, and he has the general sympathy. He is innocent, and he will be proved so."

"Mrs. Hayes said that everything depended upon his proving an *alibi*. Can he do it?"

"He believes it. I will tell you the truth, Miss Carteret. Everything depends upon finding Miss Montrose. She is the one living being by whom he can be cleared, and no one knows her whereabouts. She must be found. The trial comes off in January, and the intervening time shall be devoted to the search."

"Will it be so difficult? They went to the South, I remember—Miss Montrose and her father."

"They left there two months afterward. I passed through the vicinity and made inquiry, but could gain no information of them further. I can do Vane no good here, and I shall leave for the South again in a couple of days. Be sure that no effort shall be spared—they must be found."

Nora was by far more sanguine of the result than was the baronet. She could not know how thorough his inquiry had been, how complete the mystery of their sudden disappearance. Womanlike, her reasoning went little further than that Vane would be cleared because he was innocent.

His other stanch friend, Prescott, was presented by her guardian when the dinner-bell called the party below, and during the evening found occasion to explain to her the full particulars of the trust he held.

Morning saw the gentlemen disperse again. A telegram brought Mrs. Grahame down to Thornhurst two days later. Mrs. Hayes remained, and the household fell into the dull routine under which anxiety and sympathy were powerful elements.

It was wonderful how the rumor of Vane's success abroad changed popular opinion. A stream of visitors among his old acquaintances flowed in upon him in his prison-room; a pile of dainty, sympathetic notes were of daily occurrence. The ladies from Thornhurst were among the first, and Nora, saying little while there, carried back the image of her hero, changed from the dark, handsome boy, reckless and thoughtless, to the man matured, no less handsome, and a reformed character who, in even his present painful position, was taking the whole circle which had been loud in denouncing him by storm.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN THE COURT-ROOM.

WEEKS went by. October blazed through at Thornhurst. The yellow and crimson leaves turned brown, and then the trees held up their bare branches to a gray November sky, and the first snow fell upon them and wrapped the lawn and the hillside in a pure white sheet. At last December was wearing fast away. The coming trial was in everybody's mouth now. It was well known that the best counsel had been secured. The preliminary hearing had turned upon the verdict of the coroner's jury three years before, and the witnesses summoned were almost identical with those examined then.

Meantime Sir Rupert Archer had been following blind clews in his own personal research. First he had inserted advertisements in the leading papers of America and London. He had carefully gone over the ground he had traversed once before in his own personal interest, but now a life was at stake, he would not neglect even the most improbable chances, thus proving a friendship stronger than love. The old ruin in Georgia had been leveled to the ground. A few among the elder planters remembered the morose man who had once lived in their midst, but no one knew from whence he had come or where he had gone. One or two cognizant of his return there for a few brief weeks, three years previous, had imbibed an idea that he had gone to some one of the gold-producing localities of the world, one suggesting California, another Australia. Still another imagined that, instead of seeking a fortune, Mr. Montrose had had a fortune left him. Only one thing was evident beyond doubt: that they had quitted the vicinity unexpectedly to even themselves. The cottage had been taken until June, and father and daughter had left hurriedly in the early stormy days of March.

In addition to the advertisements already afloat, Sir Rupert immediately opened communications with suitable parties in the various points where Mr. Montrose might, with any reasonable probability, have resorted. The cable to Australia was not complete, but the baronet forwarded letters to the colony, although there was no chance of a reply before the trial, and the desperate earnestness with which he prosecuted the search in all directions was better proof than any words of how hopeless he felt his friend's case should Venetia Montrose not be found. Vane's counsel also had prosecuted inquiry to no avail.

How the days sped! how the brief interval grew briefer! how hope waned and anxiety grew as the short winter days merged one into another, and the holidays were at hand! There were no rejoicings at Thornhurst now. One anxious heart was growing

faint with hope deferred. Nora's twenty-first birthday was past, and the papers which restored every penny of Colonel Vivian's fortune to his son lay in the lawyer's hands.

The twenty-fourth day of December broke—a bright, cloudless winter day, with a crisp snow under foot, and a keen, bracing air which sent new life into languid pulses. Mr. Grahame, who for past weeks had been devoting himself strictly to his business, had come down to Thornhurst on the previous day. The two months' extension obtained through Dare had brought him all he hoped; his difficulties were lifted, his liabilities met, and he was prepared to endure the holidays in the quiet country-house in the complacent martyrdom with which he tolerated relaxation from business cares. Dare had kept himself scrupulously out of the way since his own plans had come to naught. There had been one or two private interviews between him and the counsel for the prosecution, who prided himself upon working up the neatest case of the whole year, and it was whispered that certain important points in his possession had been ferreted out by the acute lawyer. He had not once been near Vane in his prison.

Sholto Norton Hayes made one of the party at Thornhurst, and on the morning of the twenty-fourth Sir Rupert Archer joined them, just returned from a fruitless trip to the Far West, where he had pursued a W. Montrose, who, like a will-o'-the-wisp, was always before him, and who, cornered at last, proved the wrong man. He put his own anxiety out of sight for the time, but he apparently cheerful as all might, this reunion was a weight upon all as a reminder of a far different Christmas-time three years before.

The baronet was in time to join the party at the breakfast table.

"I have the morning papers along with me," he remarked, as they lingered over the meal. "Hamlin can find them in my overcoat-pocket, if you gentlemen are interested in the news."

Mr. Grahame, whose morning paper was essential to his comfort as his morning coffee, sent the man after them immediately.

"This is something out of my line," the merchant said, laying one aside. "You ladies will probably not despise it. The *Dispatch* or the *Commercial*—which will you prefer, Hayes?"

Nora took up the discarded sheet indifferently.

"A *Court Journal*," said the baronet, glancing across. "You are sure to find it extremely interesting, Miss Carteret. I am positive I received no English papers yesterday, and until then that overcoat has not been in use for the greater part of a year. That particular *Court Journal* must have arrived at a rather venerable age."

Old though it might be, something had caught Nora's careless eye. She read the lengthy paragraph through, her hand trembled, and her glance, eager and intense, went across to the baronet. Then her eyes fell and she trifled with the contents of her plate, but not a morsel after that passed her lips.

Half an hour after she went into the library where Sir Rupert had strayed alone, the paper in her hands, her voice quivering in her eagerness.

"We have been so often disappointed, I could not bear to say anything before the rest. Sir Rupert, is it possible that this can be our Miss Montrose? It seems incredible, but Mr. Walter Montrose was an Englishman, and who knows? Stranger things might have happened."

He glanced at the article she pointed out, and uttered a slight ejaculation.

It was a description of the presentation at court of the Lady Venetia Montrose, daughter of the new Earl of Cleveland, the bright, particular star who would not fail to electrify London society during the coming season.

"It is possible! I can almost hope we have really discovered them at last, now that I recall the very striking resemblance which existed between the old Earl of Cleveland and Mr. Walter Montrose. I mentioned it to his daughter once, but she ignored the relationship. I was half-inclined for the moment to suspect, and it never occurred to me later, to identify him in the successor to the earldom. I have hopes, but for fear of still another disappointment, let us keep this, which may be no more than a coincidence, to ourselves. I will send a cable dispatch the moment I return to town, to be delivered through my London lawyer for the sake of certainty."

The baronet returned to the city early of the same afternoon, accompanied by Nora and Sholto Hayes, whose mission was to call upon the prisoner.

Vane was neither indifferent nor insensible to his danger. His own great grief for his father had not left him incapable of comprehending how the dark appearances standing against him might be made to tell. He knew how vain the search after the one person who could clear him had proved; there was only one hope left, that some break might occur in the chain of circumstantial evidence so woven about him.

He was looking the worse for more than two months passed in prison, but his steady nerve and high courage had not failed him once. It was the last time Nora would see him before the trial, still three weeks in advance. It was too painful to see him often in his captivity, and a self-reproach which need have held no place in her mind, stirred her to the bitterest pain.

All unwittingly, she had come between father and son. Vane had been bitter against her once; little wonder if he had hated her; he did her fuller justice now; he had protested against her intention as made known to him, but without altering her purpose.

Sholto Hayes, never very clever, invariably experienced an uncomfortably stifling sensation when he found himself within that narrow, bare prison-room.

and lost whatever of tact he might ordinarily possess. He stood staring out of the little barred window while Nora concluded her interview with the prisoner.

She had never harassed him with signs of weakness in her occasional visits, with tears or lamentations, as the few other ladies who had called upon him invariably made it a habit to do. She came in the hope of bringing him a little comfort, to show how firm was her own faith in him, not to depress.

"There is one thing more I wish you to know—what I came to tell you to-day: Thornhurst is really yours now, as it should have been from the first. No; please don't pain me by any remonstrance, or by thanks I do not deserve."

"You have insisted on that, Nora! Promise me one thing, at least: that you will not refuse it, should I never have occasion to return. I should like to be sure Thornhurst was left in loving hands."

It was the first time he had referred, ever so remotely to the worst termination which might come of the trial. She shrank with a sickening rush of intense emotion, and put up her hands as though she would have waved the dread away.

"Don't, Vane! Oh, for pity's sake, never think it may be so bad as that."

"If you will agree to this, then, to stay there until I may come to claim the place. Pray for the time to come soon, if you will, Nora."

"You don't intend to let them hang you, I hope, Vivian," broke in Sholto Hayes, turning from his post of outlook.

"Not if I can help it," said Vane, with a smile. "It takes something more than concurrence of events such as forms the evidence to hang a man in this enlightened age."

Sir Rupert's message went, and in due time an answer from his London lawyer was returned. It was almost a greater disappointment than any one previous, since it left them still in suspense. It said:

"The Earl of Cleveland and daughter out of the country. Message will be forwarded by the earl's solicitor."

That was all—the beginning and the end of the hope which had swelled in two hearts almost to confidence—the end of it when three more weeks rolled round, and the day of trial came.

The place was crowded on that fifteenth day of January, when the prisoner was led into the courtroom. He was a trifle worn. Three months of confinement had paled the bronze which was the result of as many years' exposure. On the whole, the assembly was disappointed that he was not looking worse. The people were there, some through sympathy, by far the greater part through a morbid curiosity to personally witness the great sensation of the day. Vane, a little pale, but perfectly collected, glanced over the sea of faces greeting him, bowed to his friends, and took his place.

Mr. Blakewell, for the prosecution, opened the case. This trial was, he was thankful to say, something unusual in the annals of the criminal court. Our young men were too wild and reckless as a class; too many of them were building up a record unworthy of their names—such a record as two years of the prisoner's life which should be briefly reviewed there, would present. Crime was increasing with a frightful rapidity, not among the lower strata of humanity, the scum of the earth, but in the young generation springing up about us, those of our own blood, whose hopes were as our hopes, whose lives as our lives. But, thank Heaven! it was seldom that the black brand of the parricide fell on our young men of promise. Justice was proving itself too lax in its dealings with deeply-dyed criminals. There was much dissatisfaction in the Eastern courts at that present time over delays, and reprieves, and pardons, where prompt execution would have been no more than retributive justice, and a host of following crimes would have been prevented thereby. The state of things was all wrong; there must be a limit to it found; there must be a striking example made to shock that reckless portion of the world back to its senses again. What better opportunity for the double purpose than this? Then followed the promised review of the prisoner's life—his wild course while abroad, his further mad folly after his return. Much had been known to the public then; more remained to be unfolded now.

The witnesses summoned were for the most part those who had testified at the inquest. Nora was not spared this cruel trial. She gave her testimony as she had given it before, collectedly, but with a horrible despair of knowing that her words were adding to the probability that would sign his death-warrant. Sir Rupert Archer, Mr. Frederick Janes, and many others gave their evidence as before.

Owen Dare called and repeated his previous deposition. He had strolled out, he had followed the female form fancying something suspicious in her manner, had recognized the two as they met beneath the elms and turned away. Had smoked a cigar in the shrubbery before returning to the veranda, meantime had seen a man drive up to the door, alight and gain admittance. Voices in the library checked him as he was about to enter. The words were audible, and unintentionally he overheard a fragment of conversation between Colonel Vivian and his visitor. Heard the latter announce himself as a bank messenger and ask if a signature he appeared to display was genuine. Heard the colonel declare it a forgery. Another signature apparently displayed by the visitor also pronounced a forgery. Heard the man declare the checks had been taken as payment for Vane Vivian's debts, and suggest that the colonel should acknowledge one which had been realized upon, in which case the bank would take no measures to discover the criminal party, and the person presenting the check

could better afford to lose the amount than meddle with the law. Had stood chained by surprise during the brief space this had passed, but recovering himself had walked quietly away and gone in by a different entrance.

Henry Young, bank messenger, sworn; verified the evidence of Mr. Dare as related to his interview with Colonel Vivian. The colonel had consented to admit one of the signatures, the other false check which had not been realized upon was destroyed. The bank had never taken any step to discover the forger. It was not probable the prisoner supposed his father aware of the forgery. Had had no acquaintance with the accused. Had seen him once. The occasion was after midnight, in the first hour of New Year's Day, 1870. He had then come rushing in past Thornhurst station and sprung to a car-platform after the train was in motion. Had never known the new passenger was Vane Vivian until recognizing him in the prisoner at the bar.

Mr. Young was permitted to stand down.

A question of time was instituted. The counsel for the defense claimed that the distance from Thornhurst mansion could not have been traversed on foot in the twelve minutes' difference between city and railway time. The prosecution demanded evidence that the train was strictly on time that night. Even express trains in our country, and especially at that season, are not always infallible models of punctuality. The judge overruled the point. There were many different degrees of swiftness, and desperation would naturally lend speed to a man's feet. A few moments of time could not stand against the evidence produced, the ill-terms between father and son, the acknowledged rockless character of the latter, the finding of the pistol identified as his, the motives developed prompting the deed, and the flight so artfully planned, so successfully carried out.

Mr. Prescott testified to the prisoner's character being most exemplary during two years he had known him; his (Prescott's) firm belief that the other had never learned of his father's decease until his arrest for the crime after arriving in New York.

All the proof was dead against the accused. The evidence summed up overwhelmingly. Popular opinion, fickle as it is enthusiastic, turned again. In vain the counsel for the accused spoke eloquently of his reform, of his noble efforts to redeem himself during later years, fed on the hope of gaining a noble father's forgiveness for follies of the past. The learned counsel was drawing to the close of his appeal, the stern faces of the listening jury never softened, the impatience of the audience was becoming apparent. A messenger, slipping with professional skill through the crowd, delivered a note into the counsel's hand.

The latter glanced at it, flashed a look over the crowded court, and went on with his speech. He referred to the grave mistakes arising through trusting too utterly to circumstantial evidence. For instance, the prosecution just now had built up an exceedingly neat, and apparently incontrovertible case. He proposed showing the fallacy of all which had been made to appear so plain, and in doing so would call an important witness at that moment conducted into court.

"Lady Venetia Montrose!"

The sound of that name went like an electric thrill through the heart of the prisoner and his friends.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN ANOTHER SPHERE.

It was New Year's Day in "Merrie England"—New Year's Day in a suite of elegant apartments in St. James' street, London. It was six o'clock of the afternoon, and two ladies in rich evening toilets stood under the soft lights shining down over the magnificent appointments of the room. It was a velvet-lined casket holding two priceless jewels—one a sparkling koh-i-noor, the other a fairy pearl.

"I wonder if there is any sensation in the world powerful enough to move that calm dignity of yours, Venetia? Here am I, half wild with delight at being in London once more, and you are the same iceberg you were in France, in Italy, sailing the blue Mediterranean, or finding congenial frigidity among the Alps. Little wonder people say that, like Minerva, you lack a heart."

The little blonde threw herself petulantly into a chair, gave her azure flounces a shake, and glanced half in vexation, half-admiringly at the other's stately form. A fair, childlike, golden-haired creature, whom no one would have suspected of having three years of widowhood lying behind her. It was true, nevertheless. Flora, Lady Montrose, relic of the late Lord Charles, was little more than twenty now, scarcely less of a giddy, thoughtless child than when she had given her hand to the earl's son, four years previous to this New Year's Day of 1873. Lord Charles, a hare-brained, horseracing young nobleman, with as many faults and as few virtues as any one man of his class is often found to possess, had been flung from his horse while following the chase, and was taken up dead. The shock had killed the old earl surely as knife or ball could have done. Twin tablets were erected to their memory, for two entire months the young widow was inconsolable. The crape on her mourning dresses could not be made deep enough, the silence of the house could not be too intense. It was cruel that the sun should shine, the blue sky expand its dazzling arch, and people be gay in the same world with grief like hers.

But, one morning, my Lady Montrose awoke to the fact that her bright eyes were dulled by constant weeping; that she was growing thin and pale, moping to death in the lonely country house where she had persisted in shutting herself alone. She must make an effort; she must break the morbid gloom which had held her a victim. The arrival of

the new earl in a measure solved her difficulty. At the first intimation of his coming she wrote a piteous letter of appeal to a relative in town. She could not endure to remain there while a stranger occupied the dear old earl's place—the place she had hoped to see filled some day by her own darling Charles. Would she open her heart and home to the poor, friendless little cousin who never, never could recover from her own crushing grief? She would try to be cheerful for the sake of others, but she felt that this deep-rooted sorrow was wearing her life away, she would not long remain alone and lonely upon the earth.

A favorable answer was received, and my Lady Montrose flew like a wounded dove to the West End refuge. For one whose life was wearing away she soon developed a remarkable degree of interest in worldly affairs. With opening spring and the fashionable season she accepted an invitation from the new earl, and returned to Cleveland Park and the Sussex downs. Her own fortune with the exception of a modest settlement had gone to build up the fallen earldom, and when the present Lord Cleveland proposed that she should remain and enjoy equal advantages with his own daughter, she had consented unhesitatingly.

"Lack a heart!" repeated Lady Venetia. "I am not sure, Flora, that it would be any great evil entailed upon mankind if they all might dispense with that often-inconvenient appendage. It is a blessing that we can keep our heart experiences and heart impulses secret; some of us might startle the world if it were otherwise."

Lady Montrose opened her blue eyes wide.

"That means *you* might, I suppose. Sir Harry Neville would hardly take courage to see you in that bitter mood, Venetia. The poor little baronet deserves a reward for his faithfulness. Did you know he is here in town?—here ahead of us, and the last night I recall in Rome was of his dolorous visage. I'll wager you a box of Jouvin's best that he is the first man we see at the opera to-night."

"The probability is too great to admit of my accepting. You are rejoicing over London in even its present deserted state. For my part I shall be glad when we are safely housed again at Cleveland Park. Here comes papa, and I am sure he will agree with me."

The Earl of Cleveland appearing in a doorway nodded to his nephew's widow, and spoke abruptly:

"Venetia, I wish to speak with you."

"With me, papa? Certainly. Will it do here?"

"In private for a moment. Come this way." He walked away, and Lady Venetia followed him into a parlor communicating with his own apartments.

"Sit down, Venetia." He placed her a chair, and she sank back into it. "Sir Harry Neville has just been here. He has proposed to me for your hand."

She sat with her eyes downcast, her fingers toying with a diamond bracelet upon her arm, silent for a moment, and then her father spoke again.

"Have you no remarks to make, Venetia? I presume you heard what I have been saying."

"I heard—yes. Of course you did the proper thing and sent him away, papa."

"Of course I did nothing of the kind. I referred him to you since it appears the baronet's courage has yet failed in consulting you. Just as well, perhaps since it leaves me an opportunity to say a word. You have refused many eligible offers and I never pressed you before. I do desire now that you put all absurd prejudices aside, and accept Sir Harry Neville's proposal."

"Papa!"

The dark eyes were raised to meet his fully now; there was no flinching, no shrinking away from his stern glance.

"You appear to forget how the years are slipping away, Lady Venetia. The heyday of youth and its romantic nonsense has passed for you. You can't expect to go all your life unwed. Sir Harry is an exemplary man, one of the world's masculine angels only lacking wings. You can take no exception to him surely, titled, wealthy, and devoted as you could wish a lover. You are very lovely now, my Lady Venetia—no need for me to tell you that—you can have your choice among the flower of this fair land. But that will not last for always. After your past experience it would be the height of folly to go on throwing away chances as you have done thus far. I say again, put absurd prejudices aside and marry Sir Harry Neville when he asks you."

"Papa, marry him!" a thrill of horror accented the words.

"I have said it, my daughter. An earl's daughter, remember you are that, and do no discredit to the blue blood in your veins."

"An earl's daughter should never dishonor herself. Father!"—the tone was a thrilling appeal. She rose to stand before him, her head bowed, her hands clasped, her face marble white and dark eyes intense with pain; no one of her admirers but would have found it hard to recognize in her thus moved the haughty Lady Venetia Montrose, whom adulmentation never changed, flattery spoiled, nor princely notice flattered.

Her father was correct. She was lovely, she had always been that through the worst days of their grinding poverty, and now with magnificent surroundings, in silks and jewels, with servants to wait at her slightest beck, she was on every one's tongue as the handsomest belle in metropolitan society during the year.

"Father!" Thrilling, pain-charged, her voice lingered over his name. "I have thought you knew I could never marry. Even were I so inclined, there is a reason why I never should. Oh, papa! is there need that I should say more?"

"That will do, Venetia! You are not given to high tragedy commonly. Pray, do not resort to stage effect now. I have known, I do know, all. You are clinging to the remembrance of a man who wearied

or you in a few short weeks—who threw you over for the next pretty face he came across. You are holding yourself bound, when every equitable law would declare you free."

"Father, I am his legal wife."

"You persist in holding yourself as such. I tell you I know all about that night flight and the ceremony performed—do you suppose I would get a hint of it and not search all out? I declare that you are free, that any law to which I might appeal would declare you so to-day. I shall not appeal to law, and thereby attach the stigma which revelations would bring upon our name. If you have any fear that Owen Dare may ever assert a claim upon you, dismiss it from this hour. However great his own inclination might be, *there is a reason why he never should*. Must I command you, Venetia, to obey my wishes regarding this offer of marriage from Sir Harry Neville?"

The white face was lifted; she returned his gaze with one so steady that it seemed his own must fall before it, but it did not.

"Heaven's ordinance of marriage is not lightly put aside. For better or worse I am—his wife;" her lips faltered and refused to pronounce his name. "I will never forget that—I can never marry another man!"

Her will could be no less resolute than his; her set face told him how irrevocable that decision was.

"Very well, Venetia!" His sharp, metallic tone cut her like a pain, the steely gleam in those cold blue eyes flashed upon her. "You have disappointed the hopes I have based upon you all your life. If the time ever comes when I shall make a return in like measure—and it may come sooner than you think—if I am merciless then, recall this night, and the keen disappointment my long forbearance has not merited. Do not consider yourself longer detained."

She bowed her head and was turning away as a rap sounded upon the door.

"Come in!" said the earl.

A servant appeared upon the threshold, announcing—"Mr. Harding, your lordship."

Mr. Harding, who was the earl's solicitor, catching sight of the Lady Venetia, pressed forward.

"My obedience to your lordship," with a bow. "I took the liberty of following close, as I have what appears to be a most important message to deliver to Lady Venetia Montrose."

"For me?" The Lady Venetia waited in some surprise.

"Here it is. It was given me to be forwarded. Fortunately I learned of your arrival something less than an hour ago, and knew of course you had not received my own dispatch."

The Lady Venetia glanced at the brief lines, and held the paper toward her father with a wavering hand. It was the message interpolated in that to Sir Rupert's lawyer.

"Vane Vivian will be tried for the murder of his father on the fifteenth of January. If you can save him lose no time. Come at once."

Signed by the baronet, and to be delivered to Lady Venetia Montrose.

"I must go, papa. I can save him—I told you that when we learned that he was suspected. I must go at once."

"We will both go," said the earl, and a grim shade settled over his face which, had his daughter seen, might have shown her a fixed purpose behind his words. "What time does the first steamer leave, Harding?"

"At eleven to-morrow, my lord."

And at eleven on the morrow the Earl of Cleveland and his daughter watched the English shores recede from the steamer's deck.

CHAPTER XXX. RETRIBUTION.

A TREMOR of expectancy ran through the court-room. All eyes were turned eagerly upon the witness-stand. Lady Venetia Montrose, still in her dark rich traveling-dress, warm from the long hurried journey, very pale, unspeakably handsome and haughtily patrician, stood there. There were no weak nerves, no cowardice before the sea of faces upturned, to shake the earl's daughter. Brave, self-sufficient blood coursed in her veins. Her eyes swept once over the audience. One face there flushed and paled; Owen Dare leaned forward with a gasp, his gaze seeking hers that passed him indifferently as all the rest.

While he gazed, doubting his own senses almost, a rush of bitter, intense rage and disappointment at all he felt in that moment he had lost, her low, clear tones were heard as she began to speak. With a little legal aid her story was briefly and plainly told.

She had known Vane Vivian. Their acquaintance was merely of an ordinary sort, and she had not visited at Thornhurst except on one occasion. It was during Christmas week of 1869. She remained to the ball given there on New Year's Eve. She left the mansion at an early hour. Had a headache, and had refused the carriage Miss Carteret urged her to take. She went out unattended; was not timid, and had no dread of a mile's walk at midnight. Had not mentioned her intention to her father; had not been near him during the evening. Had walked down the long avenue and reached the gates, when she heard the sound of rapid steps at her back. She turned to see a man advance, whom she recognized as Vane Vivian, the prisoner at the bar. There was no possibility that she had been mistaken. It was a cloudy night, but the moon shone through at intervals; the light was sufficient, near as they stood, to enable her to clearly distinguish his features. Woul'd have known him by his voice alone. They stood there talking for perhaps five minutes. He said he was going to take the midnight express, and offered to see her home, as it

would take him but little out of his way. Just then the clock in the steeple began to strike, and they both stood silent, counting. It was midnight, and with a hurried word or two he dashed away over the road toward the village. Vane Vivian was at the avenue gates at precisely midnight; consequently he could not have been the murderer of his father.

Nothing could be more clear and explicit than her statement. It vindicated Vane completely. She was subjected to a rigid cross-examination, but her evidence was not to be shaken. The time occupied before she was permitted to stand down was perhaps an hour. The counsel rose. There was no longer any question of his client's innocence, but he would crave their patience while he called still another witness. Another thrill ran over the audience at the name of Walter, Earl of Cleveland.

The earl stepped forward, was sworn, and began speaking precisely and clearly.

"I have been absent from the country for almost three years. My succession to the family title and estates called me suddenly away. I was at Thornhurst on that New Year's Eve. The colonel and myself had not been on warm, friendly terms, and I went with the avowed intention of having smooth feeling between us. I had a deeper object which I did not mention; it was to discover all I could regarding a young man stopping at Thornhurst, and who held the confidence of the deceased; Owen Dare, now present in the court. I had carefully sought out all the reports regarding the difference between Colonel Vivian and his son, and from some circumstances I suspected Dare of having worked to bring the quarrel about. I had no intention of interfering in the matter; it was to my interest to hold some power over Dare, and it was that which I was seeking to obtain. I chanced to be standing near the colonel when a servant approached to announce that a person whose business was imperative awaited him in the library. He left the rooms immediately and did not return.

"I strolled out of the crowd presently. I had lost sight of Dare; I had learned as much of him as I could glean from casual conversations, and I looked about for my daughter with the intention of returning home early. She was not to be found. The company had assembled in the drawing-rooms to watch the Old Year out and the New Year in. I sauntered through one of the deserted passages to enjoy a cigar while I waited. There was a window at the end, wide open, and the lamp in the passage was turned down to a feeble glimmer. A stream of light from the glass door of the library fell across the veranda and upon the snow without. I stood with my cigar and match-box in hand, but put them back when I saw a man step cautiously out of the shadow, lean forward and gaze intently for a moment into the library. I saw his face distinctly for that moment, then he drew back as a shadow fell across the light. Just at that the clocks began striking twelve. As the last stroke sounded the man I watched put out his hand; there was a flash, a report, the shattering of glass, and a heavy fall within the room. I swear that I saw the deed committed, and that the murderer was Owen Dare!"

The sea of breathless intense faces was turned toward him; no sound stirred the crowded court; jury and judge were held with the same absorbed interest.

"He hurled the pistol away, and the next instant sprung in through the window by which I stood; he paused to pull the window shut, and rushed out through the darkened passage. I followed and saw him burst into the library, heard him utter loud exclamations of pretended horror and grief at the sight meeting him there. The people were panic-stricken, and I did what I could to bring about order. I did not tell what I had seen either then or afterward. I had no desire to become mixed in a criminal case, and I had a reason then for not wishing to be the man to hunt Owen Dare to the fate he deserved. I left for the South that New Year's Day, and a couple of months later received news of my accession to an earldom. My daughter and myself made immediate preparations for our voyage, and embarked from New York on the twenty-second day of March, the two weeks previous being passed in the city."

Here the prosecuting attorney interposed. This matter was irrelevant. It did not bear upon the case in hand.

"I am coming to that. The business occupying me in the city was connected with the researches I had chosen to make regarding Owen Dare. I put a lawyer, one of the third-class, conscienceless sort, upon his back-track. I instructed him to find out the truth of the post-obit affair, and the mystery about the payment of Vane Vivian's debts; he was to ferret that much, if possible, out of the Jew money-broker, Abraham Moses. I was to pay him in proportion to the information he brought me, and that was to end his share of the affair. On the second day before we sailed he came to me with rather startling news. Moses had been stabbed in a gambling affray by one of his own clique. The latter had fled; the former lay upon his death-bed. He had avowed his willingness to make a confession, which he did in my presence a few hours later.

"Dare had come to him early of the previous November, said he had game in view which he would throw in Moses's way if he would divide the spoils. After some fencing on both sides, he made his proposition. Young Vivian was the game. A partner known as the Vampire was taken into confidence. Young Vivian had walked straight into the snare. They had stripped him of all the money he could raise, and then I suggested binding him by a post-obit. That also was done, and the Jew repented when the outbreak occurred between father and son. Afterward a small lawyer, very much of the same class to which my spy belonged, had made a proposition in Colonel Vivian's name to

redeem the paper for the value on its face. He had disinherited his son, but he did not wish his name dishonored; he made it a condition in his payment of the debt that his action should be kept strictly secret. The Jews were glad to agree; checks for the amount were produced, and the paper given in exchange. Later, the checks were pronounced forgeries, and the wrathful Moses, close as his general spirit was, had spent a thousand dollars in discovering that the agent who had shielded himself behind the pettifogging lawyer was—Owen Dare! He had sworn a revenge upon him which I haven't a doubt he would have kept but for his untimely end. He died from effects of his wound, and I have his confession, written out and legally attested, here. I think it will appear that Dare had some deep object leading to such systematic method in the ruin of his friend."

The almost painful silence which had reigned was broken by a general movement and murmur through the court as the earl concluded his statement. Vane Vivian was free! Owen Dare, the exemplary, moral young man, possessing everybody's confidence, had the crime of murder fixed upon him, together with other crimes indicating deeper subtlety, greater vileness of heart and malevolence of spirit, than the wildest, maddest follies which a man might commit. The murmur rose to an angry roar as it was discovered that Dare's place, which he had occupied up to a few moments ago, was vacant. What an oversight to have given him the opportunity of escape!

And Owen Dare! He had sat like one bewildered when first the Lady Venetia began to speak. He had heard her testimony overthrow the whole deep scheme by which he had sought to ruin Vane. He had heard the earl relate what he had seen—had listened with the same breathless fascination which held the crowd. He heard his own name, and knew he had been denounced as the murderer.

The muscles about his mouth twitched, his hands trembled. He looked about him—every eye was turned toward the witness-stand, every ear strained to catch the evidence. He did not see one pair of keen eyes which, since the turn the trial was taking, had never wavered from himself. He slipped from his place and through the unheeding throng. He reached the door; he stepped without and a heavy hand came down upon his shoulder. Lord Cleveland had engaged to hunt him down, and Lord Cleveland had neglected no precaution.

Dare looked apathetically at the officer.

"Be quiet and come along with me. You'll be in demand here soon enough, Mr. Dare. Will you give me your word of honor to try no slippery dodges, or will you wear these?"

A pair of significant-looking handcuffs appeared above his pocket. In one instant more that officer saw as many stars as ever blazed in the firmament. Dare's right hand went out to strike him a stunning blow between the eyes; then Dare himself was gone like a flash. The officer, staggering, catching himself, recovering, had lost the bird that was in his very hand.

The myrmidons of the law, leech-like, are hard to be shaken off. Their name is legion, and the power they serve is stern as death, far-reaching as the ends of the earth.

A criminal had been fleeing and hiding from them for weeks. Incessant fear had worn him down, incessant watching had broken the once iron nerve. Hollow eyes looked out of the pinched, ghastly face—eyes that saw horrible phantoms rise up in the air before him. Now it was an old man with blood dabbling his white hairs that cried out against him; now hideous, fiend-like shapes taunted him with having betrayed a friend, with deliberately working the ruin of one who had been nothing but generous and trustful of him. Again would arise a face with great dark, reproachful eyes, in which the pain always changed to horror and loathing as the fiends about shrieked out the whole story of his black guilt. If only one remnant of tenderness could linger there, if she would look upon him kindly once, he felt that he might have found hope. But the beautiful face was always cold as stone; the hands waved him back; it was as if time and eternity lay between them.

Thus with memory haunting him in such distorted shapes night and day, with no sleep, no rest, except of that feverish kind which was worse than waking and moving, on and on for weeks.

He had shunned cities and towns, he had shunned the railways except sometimes at night, when, in fear and trembling, he ventured to board a train and be carried on through the darkness, fleeing the dread which would not be outstripped. Sometimes he hired a country-boy to drive him at full speed through desolate sections. He was so fitful, so abstracted, so fierce by turns, that people who saw him compared notes and spoke with a shudder of the mad gentleman who might do some harm if let to go loose. He doubled on his track, he took long, roundabout ways, and everywhere and always some emissary of the law started up, together with the conscience that was never still, to drive him on and on.

One wild, wet February day he stood and looked about him. It had been storming through all the preceding night. A frozen sleet was upon the ground, a bitter mist in the air, a leaden sky above. Terror had lent him wings through a dozen hours past; he had scarcely felt the storm; he knew nothing of the way he came or where he was. As he gazed, familiar points came out of the drear, flat landscape. An odd impression of having been there before was upon him, so strong that he yielded to it and followed a path which it seemed he had traversed before. It was along the coast. The sea had been sounding in his ears for days; he had occasional glimpses of it lying a dead dull gray in the distance.

He was nearer now, but the thick mist obscured his sight. It was dissipating slowly; the dull gray of sea and sky remained, but the long reaches of icy sands lay visible, before and behind.

When had he been there—when? He put his hand to his forehead and looked about. There to the right the outline of a small dark building rose; there was the sea; there an inlet with a low, black boat-house overhanging it. All familiar, and then suddenly it flashed upon him. What had drawn him there—there, of all places in the world?

In thought he went back to a far different time, when he had tossed on the waves out yonder, the dark night closed in, the fire on the beach leaping up, and the girl-like form discernible in the red glow.

A heavy step came crunching over the icy crust, but he heard it not. A fisherman in dreadnaught and tarpaulin came shambling forward, eying the thin, wasted form of the stranger, and halting near him.

"Ahoy, there! Been to see me, cap'n?"

The fugitive started and turned.

"Who lives there?" he asked, pointing a wavering finger toward the little dark house.

"Me, now. Mebbe you was a-lookin' for the old folks. They be dead and gone, months ago. Come 'long in and take a rest; you look nigh about fagged out. Come from Brewster?"

"No; from up the coast," with the caution which had grown to be an uncertain mask, so often was it now forgotten.

"I hev come from there myself this mornin'. There's a stir in town; a passel of plicemen come on after a sneaking murderer who was seen headed this way. P'raps ye heerd along the road?"

There was no suspicion in the stolid fisherman's eye, but it seemed so to Dare. The old quiver of dread was upon him again, impish shapes floating through the air, dread sounds borne upon the wind.

"What is that?" he asked, sharply, the wavering finger pointing seaward now. "A gallows?"

"Bless ye, no! That's a ship what put in there out o' the storm last night, and that's the masthead stands up so bare. They're makin' a move to git about, if I see correct. 'Pears to me yer wanderin' like, stranger!'"

Was that sound of horses' feet and of wheels crushing over the crusted sands in the distance? Dare's hand was plunged into his pocket and he pulled out some crumpled bills, all he had left, which he held out eagerly toward the man.

"I will give you that to take me out to the ship yonder."

The man looked at the money and shook his head.

"It'd be as much as a man's life is worth to venture out on that sea. I know what money's worth—we what live along here be apt to—and with a life-boat I might try, but there's naught here but an old shell scarce fit to hold together in smooth water."

"Take it, count it, see how much there is. You'll not make as much in three months. Yours to take me out there, or to make an attempt at it. For heaven's sake, then, man, what will you take for the boat?"

The man had only stolidly shaken his head, and surely, surely, that dark spot far down the shore was his pursuers upon the track. He thrust the bills in the other's hand, and sprung away in the direction of the boat-house. With a bewildered look the fisherman followed. Dare burst open the door, secured only by a hasp, and was straining upon the rusty chain which confined the one boat within.

"The key—quick, give me the key," he demanded.

"Twouldn't be fair—twould be sendin' ye to yer death—"

"I tell you I must reach that ship; it is my only chance. For the love of heaven, if you are half a man you will not stop me."

The intense earnestness in his ghastly, pallid face was not to be mistaken. There was a fierce gleam in his eyes, threatening, but it was not that moved the man.

"If ye be bent on goin', I'll try it," he said. It would have been suicide for that slender, weak young man to make the attempt alone. Something was wrong, very evidently, but the rough shoreman wisely concluded it was none of his business, and bussed himself in getting out the boat.

How slow he was! how that speck on the shore grew! Venetia could not be with them—of course not; what brought her white, haughty face before him then? Great God! if he had been but true to her—if he had never worked that scheme to marry Nora, developed in his mind when first he learned she was to be Colonel Vivian's heiress—how different might his situation be to-day! An earl's daughter for his wife—and now Nora would marry Vane, and he—oh, heavens!

The crazy boat was launched. The fisherman was one of those obstinate people, who, having put his shoulder to the wheel, would not turn back even with his judgment prompting.

Dare sprang to his place; the boat shot out into the comparatively smooth water of the inlet. Without the surf rolled high and white.

A carriage whirled up the shore. Two men in it shouted and waved their hats. The boat was trembling in the rougher water; one strong pull and the swell caught it and tossed it aloft like the veriest straw. The untrustworthy timbers cracked; the fisherman threw down his oars with a shout. In a second more the craft capsized, and the two men were struggling with the waters.

One strong wave carried Dare far out of the other's reach. How cold the water was! It had turned his blood to ice. Who put that rope about his neck? It was choking, choking! Was that a fire on the shore? The sea was blood red; he was burning—

A great wave closed over, and the remorseless undertow held its victim.

There was a sensation in the city papers next

morning. Colonel Vivian's murderer had met retribution in attempting to escape the officers upon his track. A fisherman bribed to pull him out if possible to a ship in the bay, had narrowly escaped the fugitive's fate. Dare's body had been washed ashore during the day, and thus his sins were punished though justice had been cheated of its object.

CHAPTER XXXI.

UNTIL DEATH DO US PART.

It was February still, but later in the month—a bright, sunshiny, winter day. The cedars stood up, darkly against the snow-covered ground and the blue cloudless sky. Some hardy vine flung out sprays of blood-red berries in the Thornhurst gardens. And Thornhurst itself was alive again; the mansion was full to overflowing with select guests, and those of the old country neighbors who had returned this day would swell the numbers.

"Happy is the bride the sun shines on," and Thornhurst sheltered a happy bride to be that day.

On the next day after the trial Vane Vivian had come down to Thornhurst with some deeper emotion swelling his heart than mere thankfulness for his release. He had been detained on the preceding night by the hosts of congratulatory friends hemming him in until the party from the mansion had departed. Sir Rupert and Prescott, faithful and devoted through his time of trial, were his companions during the evening, but, with a delicacy of sentiment innate with both, declined to accompany him down. Later they would follow and pass a few days there before maturing their own future plans.

Vane walked up through the grounds and into the house. Sholto Norton Hayes was smoking a cigar in the hall, and Mr. Grahame in one of the great, round-backed chairs was still poring over the morning papers. Seeing who it was he put out his hand cordially.

"We had no chance to get near you last night, Vane. And, of course, we knew you would be here. Dare has escaped, it appears. More's the pity, such a double-dyed villain as he's been proved. Strange that appearances so horribly against you should be made to turn on him whom no one ever suspected."

"Providence is inscrutable but just," answered Vane, gravely. "The ladies are here of course?"

"All in their rooms dressing for the day, I believe. All but Nora. She is in the library, and asked to see you soon as you came. By-the-by, we have two of your old friends down with us—Lord Cleveland and his daughter. That was another startling change with all the rest."

What Vane said he never could have told afterward. Nora was in the library; in a moment his hand was upon the door; he stood before her as she rose up, paling, flushing, trembling.

"Nora!"

"Vane!"

He had both her hands in his, and stood looking down upon her with infinite content expressed in his handsome, dark, smiling face. The assured light in those deep soft brown eyes embarrassed her; she half-drew away, and spoke hurriedly:

"They sent you here, I suppose. I wanted to see you among the first. I had a lawyer come down with those papers last night. They are here, waiting for you. I kept the trust until you came, and now—"

"And now, are you so anxious to throw Thornhurst out of your hands? Suppose I refuse to receive it?"

"You will not—you must not. You would not if you knew how sorry I have always been that I ever came between you and it. I never would have kept it in any case, and now I have no need. I have accepted your friend's offer, and am quite an heiress in my own right, as of course you know."

"Quite an heiress in your own right," he repeated, smilingly. "And is that fact to come between us, Nora? I don't refuse Thornhurst, but I take it again only on condition. On the condition that I may take you with it, my darling!" Then the dark, handsome face looking into hers was strangely changed and emotionate; he was pouring out his words in a rapid torrent.

"I never was worthy of you, Nora, but I have tried to make myself so, these last three years. If you can forget the past, my follies and crimes—if you can trust me and love me, I will be the happiest man on earth. I knew first how I loved you that night when you came to me like the good angel you were. I was desperate then, and you cheered me with your kind words and your faith in me which I hardly deserved then. Whatever more of a man I may have become since I owe to you. But for you I would have gone out of my home desperate, with the thought that all humanity was set against me, and possibly I might have set myself against all humanity. You have made me what I am. Will you—can you take the work of your own hands, Nora?"

"Will I and can I?" The sweet face was uplifted, blushing, happy. "Do you suppose I can forget that you refused me once—that Thornhurst with me was too heavy a cross to be borne? Have you changed your mind—oh, Vane!—about red hair?"

The rosy light was streaming in over her own dark-waved auburn tresses, bringing out its richest tinge. He pressed his lips to it reverently.

"My darling, every hair is more precious than gold. Is it mine for all time? Can you really forget and take me as I am?"

"For more than you admit yourself to be. Oh, Vane, do you not know, have you not known that I loved you from the time I came to Thornhurst first? Even when I thought you hated me I could not dislike you."

"Do you know I think we were both blind, Nora? I hated myself then for fairly worshiping you when I set my obstinate spirit against being driven. Is it

possible you would have taken me had I asked you then?"

"Very thankfully, had you given me the opportunity." And then the laughing, blushing face was hidden on his shoulder, and Vane Vivian breathed a silent prayer of thanksgiving for the happiness which was his.

And now it had come to be their wedding-day. Lord Cleveland and Lady Venetia Montrose had remained for the happy occasion. Sir Rupert Archer and Prescott were there among scores of others. The ceremony which bound for life those two so well mated, so admirably matched, was pronounced in the Thornhurst parlors. They would depart upon an extended bridal tour upon the morrow, and in their own infinite content, amid changed scenes forget the bitterest pain of the past.

It was evening, and the bright moon shed its silvery light over the earth. Out on the veranda opening from the library one had been drawn, how she might not have told. Lady Venetia's darkly lovely face was full of pain: the hands on which priceless jewels flashed in the light were tight locked together. She had heard of Dare's fate, but she could not mourn for him; he himself had killed the germ of her love on that Christmas Eve, three years before. A step sounded at her back; a tall shape was by her side, and Sir Rupert Archer's low, rich voice broke the stillness. There, in the same spot he had spoken once before, he told again the old, old story. He pleaded passionately, eloquently for the habitually silent man. His abiding love had never wavered; he had been steadfast with no hope of return, with the thought of having lost her forever. He had loved her then as he loved her now; in all his life he could never thus care for another. Would she be his own cherished wife?"

The pained, intense face turned to him, and the reluctant lips spoke.

"I have not deserved this, Sir Rupert. It reproaches and pains me more than I can say. I think you are the noblest and most faithful man on earth. I respect, I reverence you; it cuts me to the heart to cause you pain. I have but one answer—I shall never marry. Believe me, I am not worthy the honor you would do me."

"Will you not let me be the judge of that? You are all I could ever ask in a wife. Give me yourself, and I shall be content."

He was pressing nearer, eager, hopeful, in spite of his rebuff. She shrank away, putting up her hands to keep him back.

"It never can be. You drive me to a bitter confession to assure you of it. Sir Rupert, not long since my father was the chief agent in hunting down a guilty man. That man, black with the deepest crime, was my husband."

With bowed head, with eyes turned away, in broken, incoherent words she told him the story. In vain was all his eloquent pleading after that; in vain the generous spirit which would have taken her to his heart in spite of all. At last he was fain to take his answer; the fixed will would not relax; her own heart might ache and break, but he should not dishonor himself and his spotless name by wedding such as her.

Lord Cleveland and his daughter returned to England with the early spring, but months went by and Archer Hall saw nothing of the master who had been absent so many years.

Christmas Eve of 1873. The great mansion at Cleveland Park is all right. Within, in the presence of a stately, aristocratic company, with hands clasped and heads bowed before a bishop in robes whose solemn tones are echoing through the rooms, heart is answering to heart at last.

Sir Rupert has won his bride; strong devotion has won over pride and haughty will. Lord Cleveland, well content, looks on complacently, and back in the company Sir Harry Neville finds no pang of regret as he looks down upon his own fair bride, blue-eyed and fair-haired Flora—lately my Lady Montrose.

Vane and Nora are wintering in Italy. Their congratulations have come instead of their presence at this wedding. Summer will find them for a brief season at Archer Hall before they recross the Atlantic. All bitterness is left behind, all fair hopes and happy promise light the present and shine far away in the future.

THE END.

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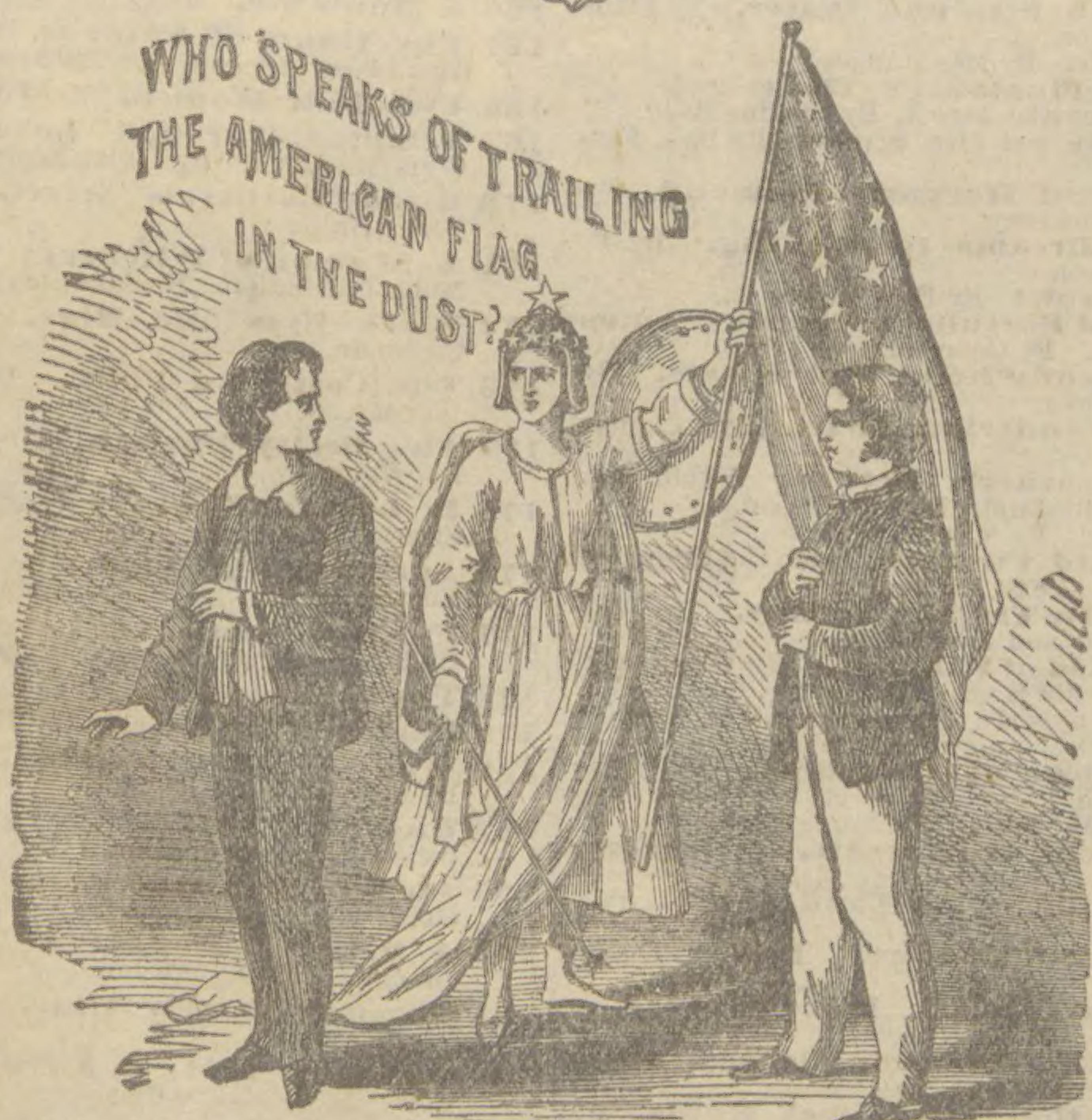
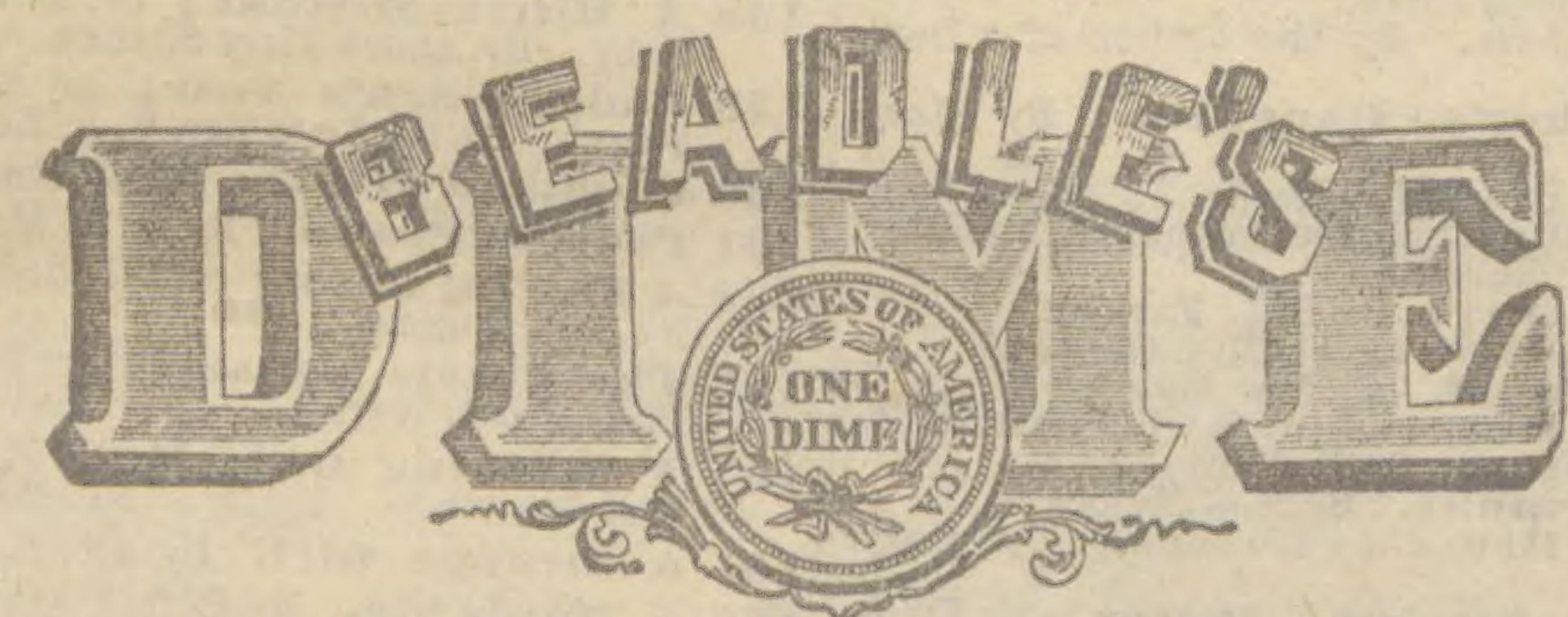
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